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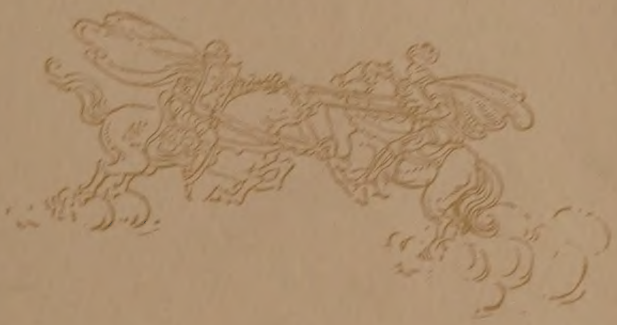

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KING ARTHUR

HENRY GILBERT

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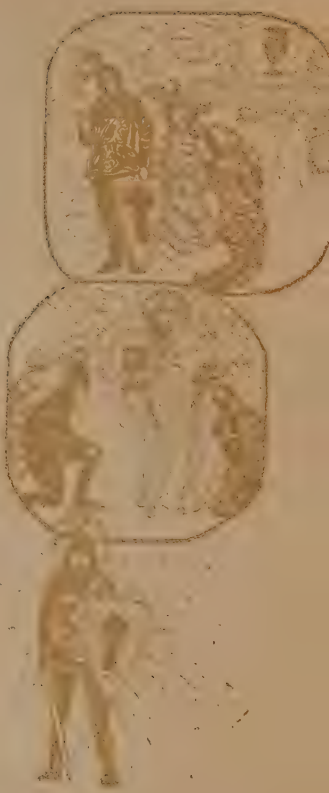

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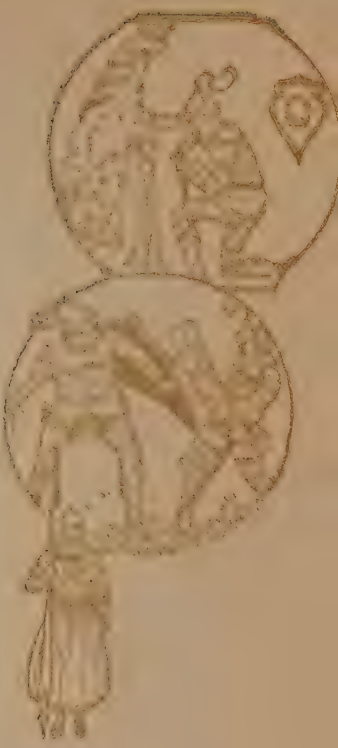

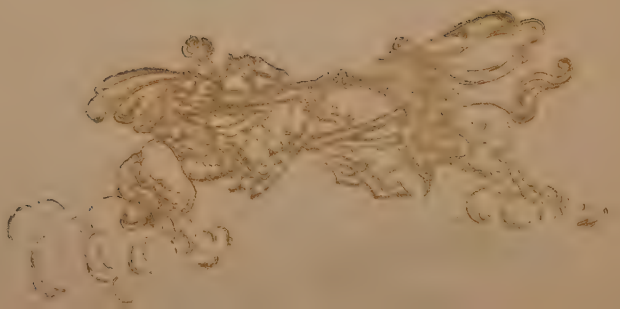

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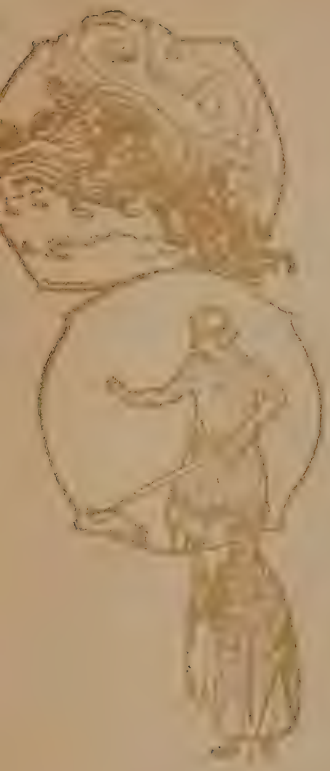

PREFACE

THIS book is an attempt to tell some of the stories of King Arthur and his Knights in a way which will be interesting to every boy and girl who loves adventures.

Although tales of these old British heroes have been published before in a form intended for young people, it is believed that they have never been related quite in the same spirit nor from the same point of view; and it is hoped that the book will fill a place hitherto vacant in the hearts of all boys and girls.

No doubt many of you, my young readers, have at some time or another taken down the *Morte D'Arthur* from your father's bookshelves and read a few pages of it here and there. But I doubt if any of you have ever gone very far in the volume. You found generally, I think, that it was written in a puzzling, old-fashioned language, that though it spoke of many interesting things, and seemed that it ought to be well worth reading, yet somehow it was tedious and dry.

In the tales as I have retold them for you, I hope you will not find any of these faults. Besides writing them in simple language, I have chosen

only those episodes which I know would appeal to you. I have added or altered here and there, for in places it struck me that there was just wanting a word or two to make you feel the magic that was everywhere abroad in those days. It seemed to me that some mysterious adventure might easily be waiting in the ruined and deserted Roman town on the desolate moor, or even just round the mossy trunk of the next oak in the forest-drive, through which the knight was riding; or that any fair lady or questing dog which he might meet could turn out to be a wizard seeking to work woe upon him. Nevertheless, I was always sure that in those bright days when the world was young, whatever evil power might get the mastery for a little while, the knight's courage, humility, and faith would win through every peril at the end.

In this book, besides reading of wonderful adventures and brave fighting, you will learn just what sort of man a perfect knight was required to be in the chivalrous times when men wore armor and rode on errantry. The duties of a 'good and faithful knight' were quite simple, but they were often very hard to perform. They were—to protect the distressed, to speak the truth, to keep his word to all, to be courteous and gentle to women, to defend right against might, and to do or say nothing that should sully the fair name of Christian knighthood.

Although, therefore, these stories of King Arthur and his men treat of knights and their ladies, of magical trolls and wonder-working wizards,

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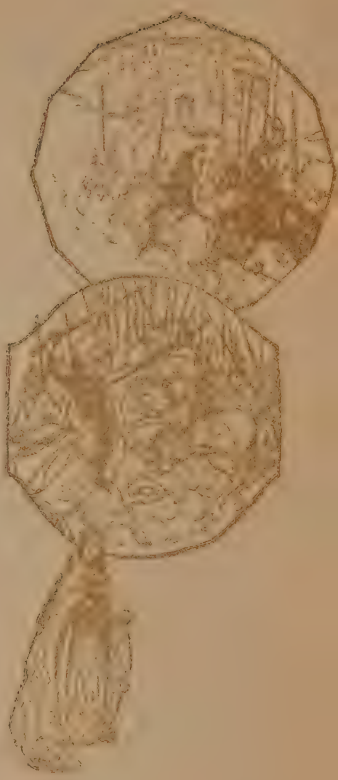
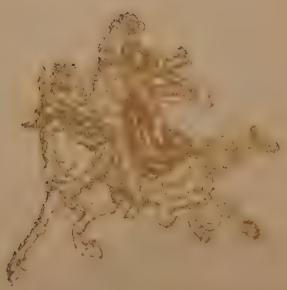
and it might seem for that reason that they can have little or nothing in common with life of the present day, it will be seen that the spirit in which they are told conveys something which every boy can learn.

Indeed, the great and simple lesson of chivalry which the tales of King Arthur teach is, in a few words, to merit 'the fine old name of gentleman.'

The history of King Arthur and his Knights is contained in two books, one being the *Morte D'Arthur,* written by Sir Thomas Malory, the other being the *Mabinogion,* a collection of old Welsh stories, first translated by Lady Charlotte Guest in 1838.

Little is known about Sir Thomas Malory, who lived in the fifteenth century. We only learn that he was a Welshman, a man of heroic mind who, as an old writer relates, 'from his youth, greatly shone in the gifts of mind and body.' Though much busied with cares of state, his favorite recreation was said to be the reading of history, and in this pursuit 'he made selections from various authors concerning the valor and the victories of the most renowned King Arthur of the Britons.' We know, further, that these selections or tales were translated mostly from poems about Arthur written by old French poets in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and that Sir Thomas Malory finished his translation in the ninth year of King Edward the Fourth (1469). This, of course, was before printing was introduced into England, but no doubt many written copies were made of the





book, so as to enable the stories to be read to the lords and ladies and other rich people who would desire to hear about the flower of kings and chivalry, the great King Arthur. When, in 1477, Caxton set up his printing press at Westminster, the *Morte D'Arthur* was one of the books which then saw the light of day.

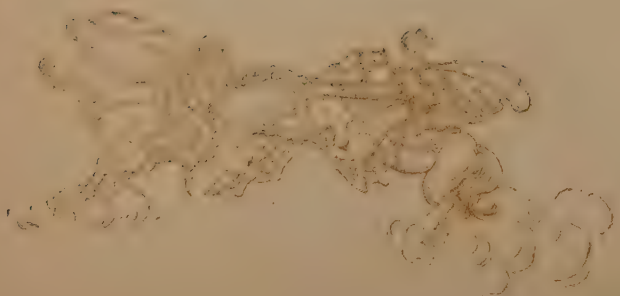
The *Mabinogion*, which contains other tales about King Arthur, is a collection of old Welsh romances. Though our earliest collection of them is to be found in a manuscript written in the thirteenth or fourteenth century, some of them are probably as old as the time when Welshmen clothed themselves in the skins of the beaver and the bear, and used stone for their tools and weapons.

It may be that, when you get older, you will go back to the two books I have mentioned, and you will find them so fascinating that you will be impatient of any other book which pretends to tell you the same tales. But until that time arrives, I hope you will find the stories as I have told them quite interesting and exciting.

HENRY GILBERT.

KING ARTHUR
FOR BOYS

He promised that on the day appointed he would fight for her with all his strength, as a true knight should.



KING ARTHUR
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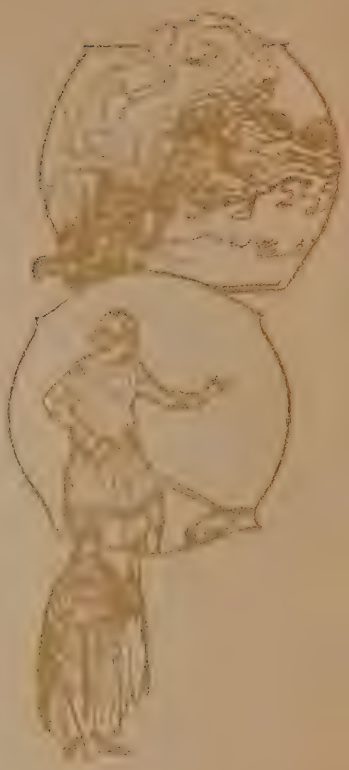


CHAPTER I

HOW ARTHUR WAS MADE KING AND WON HIS KINGDOM

In the hall of his Roman palace at London, King Uther, Pendragon of the Island of Britain, lay dying. He had been long sick with a wasting disease, and forced to lie in his bed, gnawing his beard with wrath at his weakness, while the pagan Saxons ravened up and down the fair broad lands, leaving in their tracks the smoking ruin of broken towns and desolate villages, where mothers lay dead beside their children on the hearths, fair churches stood pillaged and desecrated, and priests and nuns wandered in the wilds.

At length, when the pagans, bold and insolent, had ventured near London, the king had been able to bear his shame and anguish no longer. He had put himself, in a litter, at the head of his army, and meeting the fierce, brave pagans at Verulam (now called St. Albans) he had, in battle day-long

and stubborn, forced them at length to fly with heavy slaughter.

That was three days ago, and since then he had lain in his bed as still as if he were dead; and beside him sat the wise wizard Merlin, white with great age, and in his eyes the calmness of deep learning.

It was the third night when the king suddenly awoke from his stupor and clutched the hand of Merlin.

'I have dreamed!' he said in a low shaken voice. 'I have seen two dragons fighting—one white, the other red. First the white dragon got the mastery, and clawed with iron talons the red one's crest, and drove him hither and thither into holes and crannies of the rocks. And then the red one took heart, and with a fury that was marvelous to see, he drove and tore the white dragon full terribly, and anon the white one crawled away sore wounded. And the red dragon walked up and down in the place of his triumph, and grew proud, and fought smaller red dragons and conquered. Thus for a long time he stayed, and was secure and boastful. Then I saw the white dragon return with a rage that was very terrible, and the red dragon fought with him; but his pride had softened him, so he drew off. Then the red dragons came upon him in his wounds and beat him sore, which seeing, the white dragon dashed upon them all—and I awoke. Merlin, tell me what this may mean, for my mind is sore distraught with the vision.'

Then Merlin looked at the trembling king,

wasted with disease, and in his wise heart was great pity.

'It means, lord,' he said in slow grave tones, 'that thy people shall conquer—that a red dragon shall rise from thy kin, who shall drive out the loathsome pagan and shall conquer far and wide, and his fame shall go into all lands and for all time.'

'I thank thee, Merlin, for thy comfort,' sighed the wearied king. 'I have feared me these last years that the pagan will at the last drive my people into the western sea, and that the name of Christ shall die out of this fair land, and the foul pagan possess it. But thy words give me great heart.'

'Nay, sir,' said Merlin, 'take comfort. Great power will come to this people in a near time, and they shall conquer all their enemies.'

Anon the king slept, and lay thus for three further days, neither speaking nor moving. Many great lords and barons came craving to speak with Merlin, asking if the king were not better. But, looking into their crafty eyes and seeing there the pride and ambitions of their hearts, Merlin knew that they wished the king were already dead; for all thought that King Uther had no son to take the kingdom after him, and each great baron, strong in men, plotted to win the overlordship when the king should be gone.

'If he dieth and sayeth not which he shall name to succeed him,' some asked, 'say, Merlin, what's to be done?'

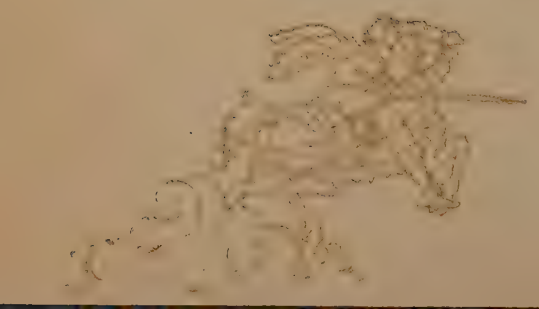
'I shall tell you,' said Merlin. 'Come ye all into this chamber to-morrow's morn, and, if God so wills, I will make the king speak.'

Next morn, therefore, came all the great barons and lords into the high hall of the palace, and many were the proud and haughty glances passing among them. There was King Lot of Orkney, small and slim, with his dark narrow face and crafty eyes under pent eyebrows; King Uriens of Reged, tall and well-seeming, with grim eyes war-wise, fresh from the long harrying of the fleeing pagans; King Mark of Tintagel, burly of form, crafty and mean of look; King Nentres of Garlot, ruddy of face, blusterous of manner, who tried to hide cunning under a guise of honesty; and many others, as Duke Cambenet of Loidis, King Brandegoris of Stranggore, King Morkant of Strathclyde, King Clariance of Northumberland, King Kador of Cornwall, and King Idres of Silura.

Now, when all these were assembled about the bed of Uther, Merlin went to the side of the sleeping king and looked long and earnestly upon his closed eyes. Anon he passed his hands above the face of the king, and Uther instantly awoke and looked about him as if startled.

'Lord,' said Merlin, 'God's hand is drawing you to Him, and these your lords desire you to name your successor ere you pass from life. Is it not your desire that your son Arthur shall take the kingdom after you, with your blessing?'

Those who craned towards the bed started and looked darkly at Merlin and then at each other;



for none had heard of the son whom the wizard named Arthur. Then in the deep silence the dying king raised his hand in the sign of blessing, and in a hollow whisper said:

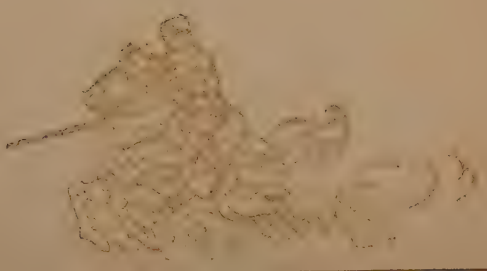
'Such is my desire. With God's blessing I wish my son Arthur to take this kingdom after me, and all that love me must follow him.'

His eyes closed, a shiver passed down the tall frame as it lay beneath the clothes, and with a sigh the soul of Uther sped.

In a few days the king was buried in all solemnity with the dead of his kindred in the Roman temple that had been made a church, where now stands St. Paul's. Thereafter men waited and wondered, for the land was without a king, and none knew who was rightfully heir to the throne.

As the days went by men gathered in groups in the market-place of London, whispering the rumors that mysteriously began to fly from mouth to mouth,—how King Lot of Orkney and Lothian was gathering his knights and men-at-arms; and King Uriens and Duke Cambenet of Loidis had got together a great host, although the remnant of the pagans had fled the country. The faces of the citizens went gloomy as they thought of the griefs of civil war, of the terrors of the sack of cities, the ruin of homes, the death of dear ones and the loss of riches. Nevertheless some were already wagering which of the great lords would conquer the others and take to himself the crown of Britain and the title of Pendragon.

As it neared the feast of Christmas, men heard



that the Archbishop of London, who was then chief ruler of the Church, had sent his letters to each and all the great nobles, bidding them to a great council at the church of St. Paul at Christmas.

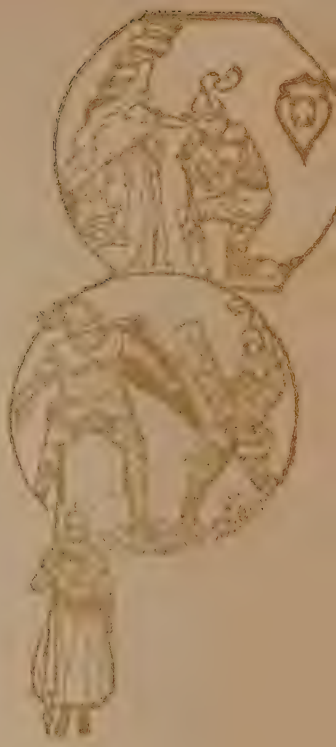
When men heard that this was done by the advice of Merlin, faces lightened and looked more joyful.

'Now shall things go right,' said they, 'for the old, old Merlin hath the deepest wisdom of all the earth.'

On Christmas Eve the city throbbed with the clank of arms and the tramp of the great retinues of princes, kings and powerful lords who had come at the archbishop's summons, and by day and night the narrow ways were crowded with armed men. Long ere the dawn of Christmas Day the lords and the common people betook themselves along the wide road which led across to the church, which then stood in a wide space amid fields, and all knelt therein to mass.

While it was yet dark a great strange cry rang out in the churchyard. Some ran forth, and there by the wall behind the high altar they saw a vast stone, four-square, that had not been there before, and in the middle thereof was stuck a great wedge of steel, and sticking therefrom by the point was a rich sword. On the blade were written words in Latin, which a clerk read forth, which said, 'Whoso pulleth this sword out of this stone and wedge of steel is rightwise born King of all Britain.'

The clerk ran into the church and told the archbishop, and men were all amazed and would have



gone instantly to see this marvel, but the archbishop bade them stay.

'Finish your prayers to God,' he said, 'for no man may touch this strange thing till high mass be done.'

When mass was finished, all poured forth from the church and thronged about the stone and marveled at the words on the sword. First King Lot, with a light laugh, took hold of the handle and essayed to pull out the point of the sword, but he could not, and his face went hot and angry. Then King Nentres of Garlot took his place with a jest, but though he heaved at the sword with all his burly strength, till it seemed like to snap, he could not move it, and so let go at last with an angry oath. All the others essayed in like manner, but by none was it moved a jot, and all stood about discomfited, looking with black looks at one another and the stone.

'He that is rightwise born ruler of Britain is not here,' said the archbishop at length, 'but doubt not he shall come in God's good time. Meanwhile let a tent be raised over the stone, and do ye lords appoint ten of your number to watch over it, and we will essay the sword again after New Year's Day.'

So that the kings and lords should be kept together, the archbishop appointed a great tournament to be held on New Year's Day on the waste land north of the city, which men now call Smithfield.

Now when the day was come, a certain lord, Sir

Ector de Morven, who had great lands about the isle of Thorney, rode towards the jousts with his son, Sir Kay, and young Arthur, who was Sir Kay's foster-brother. When they had got nearly to the place, suddenly Sir Kay bethought him that he had left his sword at home.

'Do you ride back, young Arthur,' he said, 'and fetch me my sword, for if I do not have it I may not fight.'

Willingly Arthur turned his horse and rode back swiftly. But when he had arrived at the house he found it shut up and none was within, for all had gone to the jousts. Then was he a little wroth, and rode back wondering how he should obtain a sword for his foster-brother.

Suddenly, as he saw the tower of St. Paul's church through the trees, he bethought him of the sword in the stone.

When he came to the churchyard he tied his horse to the stile and went through the grave-mounds to the tent wherein was the sword. He found the place unwatched, and the flashing sword was sticking by the point in the stone.

Lightly he grasped the handle of the sword with one hand, and it came forth straightway!

Then, glad that his brother should not be without a sword, he swiftly gat upon his horse and rode on, and delivered the sword to Sir Kay, and thought no more of aught but the splendid knights and richly garbed lords that were at the jousts.

But Sir Kay looked at the sword and the writing, and knew it was the sword of the stone, and mar-

veled how young Arthur had possessed himself thereof; and being of a covetous and sour mind, he thought how he might make advantage for himself. He went to his father, Sir Ector, and said:

'Lo, father, this is the sword of the stone, and surely am I rightful king.'

Sir Ector knew the sword and marveled, but his look was stern as he gazed into the crafty eyes of his son.

'Come ye with me,' he said, and all three rode to the church, and alit from their horses and went in.

Sir Ector strode up the aisle to the altar and, turning to his son, said sternly:

'Now, swear on God's book and the holy relics how thou didst get this sword.'

Sir Kay's heart went weak, and he stammered out the truth.

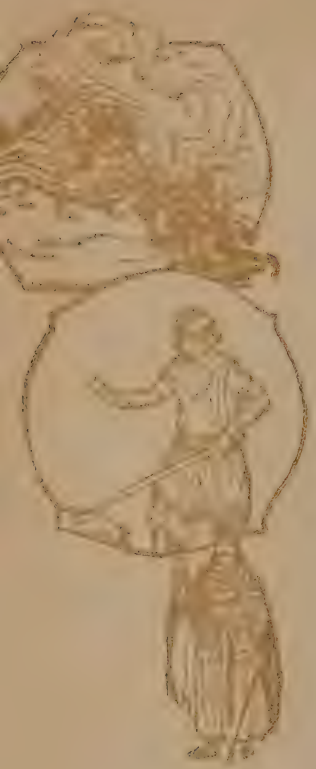
'How gat you this sword?' asked Sir Ector of Arthur.

'Sir, I will tell you,' said Arthur, and so told him all as it had happened.

Sir Ector marveled what this should mean; for Arthur had been given to him to nourish and rear as a week-old child by Merlin, but the wizard had only told him that the babe was a son of a dead lady, whose lord had been slain by the pagans.

Then Sir Ector went to the stone and bade Arthur put back the sword into the wedge of steel, which the young man did easily.

Thereupon Sir Ector strove with all his strength



to draw the sword forth again, but though he pulled till he sweated, he could not stir the sword.

'Now you essay it,' he said to his son. But naught that Sir Kay could do availed.

'Now do you try,' he bade Arthur.

Arthur lightly grasped the handle with one hand, and the sword came out without hindrance.

Therewith Sir Ector sank to his knees, and Sir Kay also. And they bared their heads.

'Alas,' said Arthur, 'my own dear father and brother, why kneel ye so to me?'

'Nay, nay, my lord Arthur, it is not so,' said Sir Ector, 'for I was never your father. I wot well ye are of higher blood than I weened. For Merlin delivered you to me while yet ye were a babe.'

The tears came into Arthur's eyes when he knew that Sir Ector was not his father, for the young man had loved him as if he were of his own blood.

'Sir,' said Ector unto Arthur, 'will ye be my good and kind lord when ye are king?'

'Ah, if this be true as ye say,' cried Arthur, 'ye shall desire of me whatsoever ye may, and I shall give it you.'

'Sir,' said Sir Ector, 'I crave a boon of you, that while you live, your foster-brother, Sir Kay, shall be high seneschal of all your lands.'

'That shall be done, and never man shall have that office but him, while he and I live.'

Then hastily Sir Ector rode to the archbishop, and told him how and by whom the sword had been achieved from the stone. Thereupon the arch-

bishop let call a great meeting on Twelfth Day of all the kings and barons.

So on the day appointed, all men gathered in the churchyard of St. Paul's, and the tent was removed from about the stone. From day dawn to the evening the kings and princes and lords strove each in his turn to draw the sword from the stone. But none of them availed to move it.

While they stood about, dark of look, gnawing their lips with rage and disappointment, the archbishop turned privily to Sir Ector and bade him bring Arthur.

The young man came, quietly clad in a tunic of brown samite, of medium height, with curly hair above a fair face of noble, though mild mien. As he came among the richly clad nobles, they looked haughtily at him, and wondered who he was and why he came, for as yet none had been told that the sword had been drawn by him.

The archbishop, tall, white-haired and reverend, called Arthur to him and said in grave tones:

'My son, I have heard a strange tale of thee, and whether it be true or false, God shall decide. Now, therefore, do ye take hold upon this sword and essay to draw it from the stone.'

The proud barons, some with looks amazed and others with sneering laughter, pressed about the young man as he stepped towards the stone. Arthur took the handle of the sword with his right hand, and the sword seemed to fall into his grasp.

Thereat arose great cries of rage, and angry

looks flashed forth, and many a hand went to dagger haft.

'Ho, archbishop!' cried King Lot, fiercely striding toward the tall ecclesiastic, 'what wizard's brat are you foisting upon us here to draw the sword by magic?'

' 'Tis a trick!' cried Nentres of Garlot, his bluff manner falling from him, and all the savage anger gleaming from his eyes. 'A trick that shall not blind men such as we!'

'Who is this beggar's boy that is put forth to shame us kings and nobles?' said King Mark, and his hand sought his dagger as he disappeared among the crowd and wormed his way towards where stood young Arthur. But Sir Ector and Sir Kay, seeing the threatening looks of all, had quickly ranged themselves beside young Arthur, and with them went Sir Bedevere, Sir Baudwin and Sir Ulfius, three noble lords who had loved King Uther well.

'Peace, lords!' said the old archbishop, calmly meeting the raging looks about him. 'Ye know what words are about the sword, and this youth hath drawn the sword. I know naught of tricks or wizardry, but I think high Heaven hath chosen this way of showing who shall be lord of this land, and I think this young man is rightful King of us all.'

' 'Tis some base-born churl's son that the wizard Merlin would foist upon us!' cried the barons. 'We will have none of him!'

'A shame and dishonor it is, so to try to over-

rule us, kings and lords of high lineage, with an unknown youth,' cried others.

'We will have the sword put back and set a watch over it,' cried King Uriens, 'and we will meet here again at Candlemas, and essay the sword. And at that time, my lord archbishop, thou shalt do the proper rites to exorcise all evil powers, and then we will try the sword once more.'

So was it agreed by all, and ten knights watched day and night about the stone and the sword.

But it befell at Candlemas as it had befallen at Twelfth Day, that for all their strength and might, none of the kings or barons could draw forth the sword; but into the hand of the unknown Arthur the weapon seemed to fall.

Whereat they were all sore aggrieved and rageful, and resolved that they would have yet another trial at Easter. It befell at the feast of Easter as it had befallen before, and this time the kings and lords for angry spite would have fallen upon Arthur and slain him, but the archbishop threatened them with the most dreadful ban of Holy Church. They forbore, therefore, and went aside, and declared that it was their will to essay the sword again at the high feast of Pentecost.

By Merlin's advice the young Arthur went never about, unless the five friends of Uther were with him, that is to say, Sir Ector and his son Sir Kay, Sir Bedevere, Sir Baudwin and Sir Ulfius. And though at divers times men were found skulking or hiding in the horse-stall, the dark wood by the hall, or the bend in the lane, in places where

Arthur might pass, no harm came to him by reason of the loving watch of those noble knights.

Again at the feast of Pentecost men gathered in the churchyard of St. Paul's, and the press of people was such that no man had ever seen the like. Once more the kings and princes and great barons, to the number of forty-nine, came forward, and each in turn pulled and drew at the sword in the stone until the sweat stood on their brows. Nevertheless, though the sword point was but the width of a palm in the stone, not the mightiest of them could move it by the breadth of a hair.

Then a cry came from among the common people, and so strong was it that the nobles looked as if they hated to hear it.

'Let Arthur draw the sword!' was the call from a thousand throats.

The venerable archbishop came and took Arthur by the hand, and led him towards the sword. Again the young man held the rich pommel with his single hand, and that which none of the forty-nine great men could do, he did as easily as if he but plucked a flower.

A fierce cry leaped from among the thousands of the common people.

'Arthur shall be our King!' they cried. 'Arthur is our King! We will no longer deny him!'

Many of the princes and barons cried out with the commons that this was their will also; but eleven of the most powerful and ambitious showed by their arrogant and angry gestures that they refused to own Arthur as their lord.

For a long time the uproar raged, the cries of the common folk becoming fiercer and more menacing against the counter cries of the eleven kings and their adherents.

At length from among the people there came the governor of London, who, in his rich robes of office, leaped upon the stone where but lately the sword had been.

'My lords, I speak the will of the commons,' he cried, and at his voice all were silent. 'We have taken counsel together, and we will have Arthur for our King. We will put him no more in delay, for we all see that it is God's will that he shall be our King, and who that holdeth against him, we will slay.'

With that he got down from the stone, kneeled before Arthur, put the keys of the city in his hands, and rendered homage unto him. The great multitude kneeled likewise, bowing their bare heads, and cried him mercy because they had denied him so long.

Because they feared the great multitude, the eleven kings kneeled with them, but in their hearts was rage and rebellion.

Then Arthur took the sword between his hands and, going into the church, he laid it on the high altar, and the archbishop blessed him. Then, since Arthur was as yet unknighted, King Kador of Cornwall, who was brother of King Uther, made him a knight.

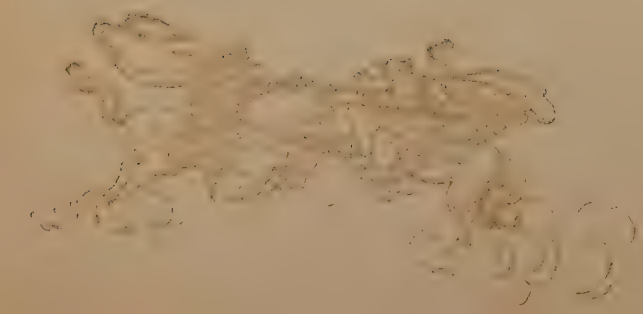
Standing up in the sight of all the people, lords and commons, Arthur laid his left hand upon the

holy relics; then, lifting up his right hand, he swore that he would be a true king, to stand forth as their ruler in justice and mercy, to keep them from oppression, to redress their wrongs, and to establish right throughout his dominions.

When Arthur in his palace at London had received the homage of all the lords and princes from the lands south of Humber, he appointed his officers. Sir Kay he made seneschal or steward, and Sir Baudwin was made constable, and Sir Ulfius he named chamberlain of his court. By the counsel of Merlin he made Sir Bedevere Warden of the Northern Marches, for the lands of the eleven kings lay mostly in the country north of Trent, and though those princes had yielded lip service to Arthur, Merlin knew that in their hearts they nurtured the seeds of conspiracy.

King Arthur made a progress through all his territories, staying at the halls of those who did service for the lands they held of him, and he commanded all those who had suffered evil or wrong to come to him, and many came. The king's wrath when he heard a tale of women and orphans wronged or robbed or evilly treated by proud or powerful lords and knights, was terrible to see. Many were the pale captives he released from their deep dungeons, many were the tears he wiped away, and hard and heavy was his punishment of evil lords who thought their power would forever shield them from penalty for their cruelties.

When this was done, he caused a proclamation to be uttered, that he would hold his coronation at



the city of Caerleon-upon-Usk, at the feast of Hallow-mass then following; and he commanded all his loyal subjects to attend. When the time came, all the countryside on the marches of Wales was filled with the trains of noblemen and their knights and servants gathering towards the city.

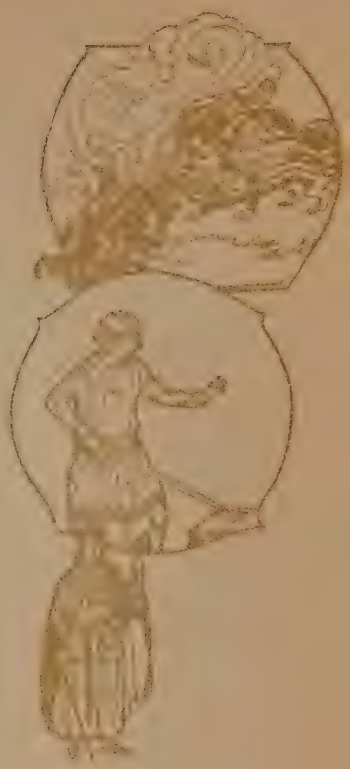
As Arthur looked from the window of the palace which the Romans had builded, and which looked far and wide over the crowded roads, word was brought to him that six of the kings who had resented his kingship had come to the city.

Thinking that these kings and knights had come for love of him, and to do him worship at his feast, King Arthur sent them many and rich presents. But his messengers returned, saying that the kings and knights had received them with insults, and had refused to take the gifts of a beardless boy who had come, they said, of low blood.

Whereat the king's eyes flashed grimly, but at that time he said no word.

In the joustings and knightly games that were part of the festival of the coronation, the six kings ever ranged themselves against King Arthur and his knights, and did him all the despite they could achieve. At that time they deemed themselves not strong enough to hurt the king, and therefore did no open act of revolt.

Now it happened, when the feasting was over and many of the kings and lords had departed home again, that Arthur stood in the door of his hall that looked into the street, and with his three best nobles, Sir Kay, Sir Bedevere and Sir Baudwin, he



watched the rich cavalcades of his lords pass out of the town. Suddenly, as he stood there, a little page-boy, fair of face but for the pitiful sorrow and gauntness upon it, dashed from the throng of a lord's retinue which was passing and threw himself along the ground, his hands clutching the feet of the king.

'O King Arthur, save me!' the lad cried, spent of breath, 'or this evil lord will slay me as he hath slain my mother and my brothers.'

From the throng a tall black knight, leaping from his horse, strode towards the boy, and would have torn his hands from their hold upon the king's feet.

'Back, sir knight!' said the king. 'I will hear more of this. Who are you?'

The knight laughed insolently.

'I? Oh, I am one that the last king knew well to his sorrow. I am Turquine, brother to Sir Caradoc of the Dolorous Tower.'

'What is this boy to you?'

'He is Owen, the caitiff son of a brave father, who gave him to my care to train in knightly ways. But 'tis a puling fool, more fitting for the bowers of ladies.'

'Nay, king, he lies!' said the lad who kneeled before the king. 'I am his nephew. His hand slew my dear father treacherously, and he hath starved my mother to her death. For our lands are rich while his are poor, and my father warned me of him ere he died. This man hath kept me prisoner, used me evilly, starving me and wealing me with

cruel blows daily. I think he hath my death in his heart.'

'I can speak of this thing,' said a knight, who came forth from the throng. 'I am Sir Miles of Bandon. I know this lad speaks truth, for his father was mine own dear cousin. This Sir Turquine is a felon knight.'

The brow of the king went dark. He looked from the cruel insolent face of the black knight to the wan beseeching face of the lad.

'Hark ye!' said Arthur to Turquine, and his voice was terrible, for all that it was very quiet, 'ye shall answer to me and my justice for any evil you have done this young boy or his people. When I send for thee, come at once, or it will be worse for thee. The boy stays with me. Now begone!'

The big knight looked with hatred and surprise in his eyes, and for a while said naught. Then, with an insolent laugh, he turned and vaulted on his horse. 'I may come when thou dost not expect me, sir king!' he said, mocking, and shot an evil look at the young page.

Thenceforward the young page Owen stayed in the court, doing his services deftly and quietly, with an eye ever on the king to do his bidding. One night, when a storm raged and the town lay dark and quiet, King Arthur sat in his hall. Sir Kay and Sir Bedevere told tales, or the king's bard sang songs to amuse him, while about them moved young Owen, noiseless of step, quick of eye, and as restless as an unquiet spirit.

Anon the lad would pass through the arras, creep

to the great outer door, and look at the porter in his room beside it. Then he would stand at the wicket and listen to the rare footsteps pass down the road, and when the rising wind keened and shrilled through the crannies, he would glance about him with quick looks as if in fear of an enemy.

Once he went to Falk, the king's porter, and said:

''Tis a stormy night, Sir Falk. I doubt few are about the streets of Caerleon on such a night.'

'Few indeed,' said Falk.

'Yet methought but now I heard the rattle of a bridle in the distance, as if a steed stood in armor.'

'I heard naught,' said Falk. ''Twould be but the grinding of a chain beside a horseblock.'

Young Owen went away, and sat where the king and his knights listened to the marvelous tales of the wise Gildas, who told of most terrible witches and warlocks in the wizard woods of Brittany.

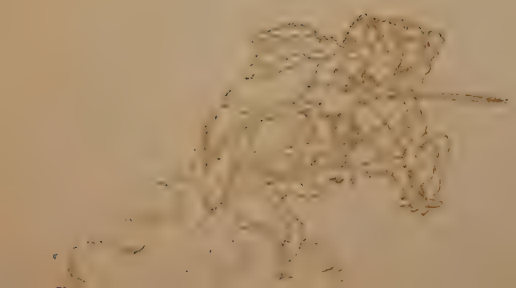
Again the lad approached the door and listened; then going to the porter he said:

'This drenching storm will tear the last poor leaves from the forest trees, I ween, Sir Falk.'

'Of a truth,' said the porter, ''tis overlate for leaves. They be stuck in the mires of the rides long ere this.'

'They could not be blown so far in this gushing storm,' said the page, 'and therefore I have deceived myself. But I thought I heard the rustle of leaves on the stones before the door but now.'

'It could not be,' said the porter; 'it was doubt-



less the gouts of water from the roof of the hall thou didst hear.'

Owen went away, but in a little while returned, and softly opened the wicket panel in the door a little way, and looked forth into the roaring darkness of rain and wind.

'Think you, Sir Falk,' he said, going to the porter, 'that the witches from the woods of Denn do send their baleful fires on such a night as this to lead poor houseless wretches into the marsh below the wall?'

The porter laughed.

'Thou'rt over-full of fancies to-night, young sir,' he said. 'Have no fear of witches. We're all safe and sound here till the blessed daylight comes, and none need stir out till then.'

'Methought I saw a flash in the dark but now,' said Owen, 'as if 'twas the gleam of a sword or a wandering marsh fire.'

'Not a doubt 'twas but a lightning flash,' returned the porter. 'Now go ye, for I hear the king moving towards bed. Sleep soundly, lad; no need to fear this night.'

In a little while the palace was sunk in darkness, and in silence save for the smothered cries of sleepers in their dreams. Outside, the rain still sobbed at the eaves, and the wind beat at the narrow casements. Time passed, and for all his weariness young Owen could not sleep.

His spirit had been heavy all the day, and vague and dreadful fears had haunted him. Something told him that the life of the beloved king, who had

taken him from the foul and cruel power of Sir Turquine, was threatened. He rose in the dark from his pallet of straw in the hall where lay the other pages, and stole softly out.

He felt his way softly along the corridor in the deep darkness. Suddenly he stopped. Something alive was near him in the dark. Even as he turned, a hand seized him by the throat, and a hateful voice which he knew growled in his ear: 'Lead us to the king's room, or this shall sink in thy heart!'

He knew at once that all his fears of the day and the night had been true. He had indeed heard the stealthy footsteps before the door of the hall, and had seen the dull gleam of a sword in the hand of one of those who lay in wait to murder the king.

'Speak!' said the voice again. 'Is the king's room backward or forward?'

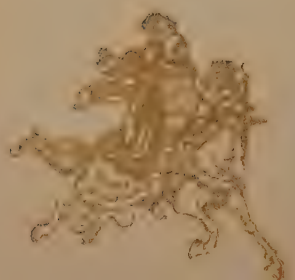
'I will not tell thee!' he gasped, and heard a low mocking laugh.

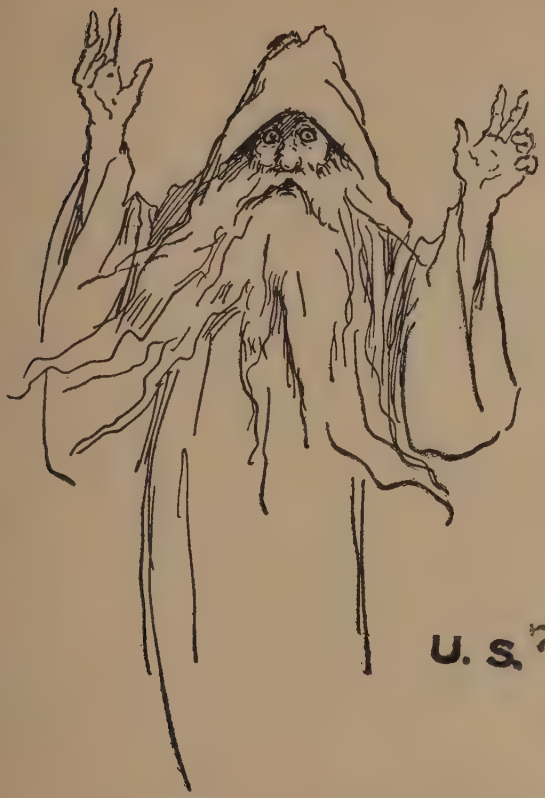
''Tis thee, my caitiff boy!' sneered Sir Turquine, for he it was. 'Then this for thee!'

With the words he thrust his dagger into the body of the struggling boy, who swooned and dropped to the floor.

In a few moments Owen stirred, for his struggles had caused his enemy's dagger to swerve, and though weak from loss of blood, the young page knew that he must act at once to save his king.

He heard the stealthy footsteps of the murderers going backwards to the hall, and, filled with joy, he pressed forward. His head was dizzy, he felt as if every moment he must sink in a swoon; but





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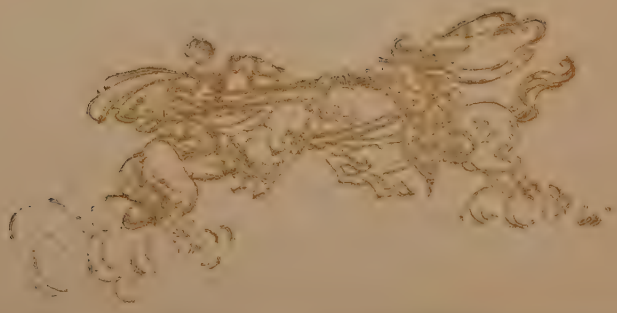
The tall gray form of Merlin took shape, for so great was the power of this wizard he could come and go unseen.



at length he reached the door, turned the handle and fell in.

'The king!' he cried. 'Save the king! Turquine has broken in and seeks his life.'

At his shrill cry there was the rush of men and torches along the corridors and into the room. Sir Bedevere was at the head of them, and in a moment he, with twenty half-dressed knights behind him, was scattering through the palace seeking the murderers, while the king ordered his leech or doctor to attend instantly to Owen's wound.

This was soon found not to be severe, and the lad was laid at the foot of the king's bed, glad and proud to hear the king's words of praise.

Then Sir Bedevere entered, saying that the murderers had fled as soon as they found they were discovered.

'But, my lord king,' he said, 'this is no murderous attempt by one insolent lord. It means, my king, that thou wilt have to fight for thy kingdom. It is civil war!'

'What mean you, Sir Bedevere?'

'Sir Turquine is but one of them, my king,' replied Bedevere. 'He is but the tool of the six kings who have put such great despite upon you. For with them also in this midnight murder-raid I saw King Nentres of Garlot and Duke Cambenet.'

Suddenly, as he spoke, the tall gray form of Merlin took shape before them, for so great and marvelous was the power of this wizard that he

could come and go unseen, except when he willed that men should see him.

'Sir,' said Merlin, 'ye owe your life to this brave lad here, and he shall be a passing good man when he shall have attained his full strength, and he doth deserve your high and gracious favor.'

'That shall he have,' said the king, and smiled at young Owen, and the smile made the lad forget all the burning of his wound for very pride and gladness.

'And now,' said Merlin, 'if ye will gather your men I will lead you to the hold of those murderous kings by a secret way, and ye should give them such a sudden blow as will discomfit them.'

In a little while all was ready, and then, silently, with muffled arms, the men of Arthur were marching forth down the narrow dark lanes of the town to where the place was ruinous with old houses left forsaken by their Roman masters when they had gone from Britain fifty years before.

Merlin led them to a great squat tower which stood beside the wall, wherein a single light gleamed at a high window. Causing some to surround this place, Merlin led others to a broken door, and there they entered in. Then was there a sudden uproar and fierce fighting in the rooms and up the narrow stairs.

In the darkness King Lot, with a hundred knights, burst out through a rear door, and thought to escape; but King Arthur with his knights waylaid them, and slew on the right and on the left, doing such deeds that all took pride in his bravery

and might of arms. Fiercely did King Lot press forward, and to his aid came Sir Caradoc, who set upon King Arthur in the rear.

Arthur drew from his side the sword he had so marvelously taken from the stone, and in the darkness it flashed as if it were thirty torches, and it dazzled his enemies' eyes, so that they gave way.

By this time the common people of Caerleon had heard the great outcry and the clang of swords on armor. Learning of the jeopardy of their beloved king from midnight murderers, they ran to the tower, and with clubs and staves and bills they slew many of the men of the evil kings, putting the rest to flight. But the six kings were still unharmed, and with the remnant of their knights fled and departed in the darkness.

A few days later King Arthur journeyed back to London, and on an evening when, in the twilight, he stood upon the roof of the palace overlooking the broad Thames, he was aware of a shadow beside him where no shadow had been before. Before he could cross himself against the evil powers of wizardry and glamor, the steel-blue eyes of Merlin looked out from the cloud, and the magician's voice spoke to him as if from a great distance.

'I stand beneath the shaggy brows of the Hill of Tanyshane,' said the voice, 'and I look down into the courtyard of the castle of King Lot. There I see the gathering of men, the flash of torches on their hauberks, the glitter of helms, and the blue gleams of swords. I have passed through these

northern lands, from the windswept ways of Alclwyd to the quaking marshes of the Humber. Eleven castles have I seen, and each is filled with the clang of beating iron, the glow of smiths' fires and the hissing of new-tempered steel. Call thy council, and abide my return, for now you must fight for your kingdom, O king, and for your very life.'

The voice ceased, and the shadow and the vivid eyes it half concealed died away with it.

Into the council-chamber three days later, while men waited for they knew not what, Merlin entered.

'What news do you bring, Merlin?' they cried.

'Of civil war!' he said. 'I warn you all that the six kings ye gave a check to at Caerleon have taken to themselves four others and a mighty duke. They will to thrust Arthur, whom they call base-born, out of his life. Mark you, they are passing strong, and as good fighting men as any alive—pity it is that great Uriens is with them, the wisest and noblest fighter of them all!—and unless Arthur have more men of arms and chivalry with him than he can get within this realm, he will be overcome!'

'Oh, but we be big enough!' cried some.

'That ye are not!' said Merlin. 'Which of ye have single-handed beaten back the pagan hordes from your lands? Which of ye can match King Lot for subtlety and craft, or the great Uriens of Reged for wisdom in war?'

'What is to do, then? Tell us your counsel,' said they all.

'This is my advice,' replied the wizard. 'Ye must send an embassy to King Ban of Brittany and King Bors of Gaul, promising to aid them when King Claudas, their common enemy, shall fight them again, if they will come and aid our king in this his fight for life and kingdom.'

In a few weeks this was done. King Ban of Brittany and his brother, King Bors, crossed into Britain with five thousand good knights, sworn to aid Arthur. With King Ban came his son, young Lancelot, who was later to make more fame and more dole than any knight of Arthur's court.

On a day in early spring, the hosts of Arthur and his two allies were encamped in Sherwood Forest, and the fore-riders or scouts, which Merlin had sent out, came hastening in to say that the host of the eleven kings was but a few miles to the north of Trent water. By secret ways, throughout that night, Merlin led the army of Arthur until they came near where the enemy lay. Then did he order an ambush to be made by some part of their men, with King Ban and King Bors, by hiding in a hollow filled with trees.

In the morning, when either host saw the other, the northern host was well comforted, for they thought King Arthur's force was but small.

With the pealing of trumpets and the shouts of the knights, King Arthur ordered his men to advance, and in their midst was the great silken banner with the fierce red dragon ramping in its folds. This had been blessed by the Archbishop of Lon-

don at a solemn service held before the host left London.

All day the battle raged. Knight hurled and hurtled against knight, bowmen shot their short Welsh arrows, and men-at-arms thrust and maimed and slashed with the great billhooks and spears.

King Arthur, with his bodyguard of four—Sir Kay, Sir Baudwin, Sir Ulfius, and Sir Bedevere—did feats of arms that it was marvel to see. Often the eleven kings did essay to give deadly strokes upon the king, but the press of fighting kept some of them from him, and others withdrew sore wounded from the attack upon him and his faithful four.

At length it appeared to Arthur that his host was yielding before the weight of numbers of the enemy, and then he bethought him of a strategy. He took counsel of his nobles, and they approved; he sent a trusty messenger to the Kings Ban and Bors, who still lay in ambush; and then, commanding his trumpets to sound, he ordered a retreat.

As had been agreed on, the knights on Arthur's side made their retreat in a confusion that seemed full of fear; and the enemy, joyfully shouting their cries of triumph, pursued them headlong.

King Lot's host, led onward thus unthinking, were sure of victory. But their cries of triumph were short and quickly turned to woe; for when they had passed the place of ambush, they heard cries of terror in their rear, and turning, they found a great host pouring forth from the hollow combe, thick as angry bees from a hive.

Then, indeed, taken in the rear and in the front, there was little hope of victory, and King Lot's men fought for dear life.

Seeing King Bors, where he hewed terribly in the press of battle, King Lot, who knew him well, cried out:

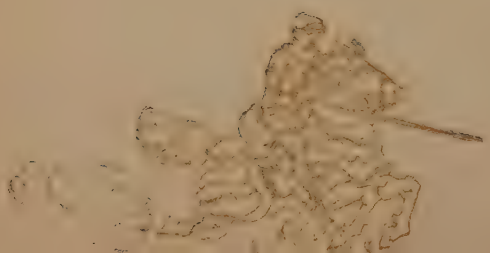
'Ah, Mary, now defend us from death and from horrible maims, for I see well we be in fear of quick death! Yonder is King Bors, one of the most worshipful and best knights in the world; and there is his twin brother, King Ban, as terrible as he. How came they and their host into Britain, and we not know it, alas?'

'By the arts of that wizard Merlin, I doubt not,' said King Uriens. 'And I doubt not we shall all be sped. Look you, Lot,' he went on, 'whoever that Arthur may be, I'll swear by my head he is not of low-born breeding, but a very man and a marvelous fighter.'

'If you lose heart now, why, go and swear fealty to him!' sneered King Lot.

'Keep your sneers,' said Uriens sternly. 'I'll pay the price of rebellion to my last breath, as I have vowed.'

By now the great mass of King Lot's host was either slain or run away, and the evening drew on; but the eleven kings, wounded, spent, and full of anguish at defeat, drew together with a few hundred of their knights, and vowed to die fighting. When they looked to see where they stood, they found that Arthur had penned them upon a little bluff of land that ended steeply over a deep river.



and that no way was open for them to escape from the death of swords, unless they chose to leap on the rocks below the cliff.

'See!' said Uriens, with a laugh, 'while we fought like wild boars, and thought of nothing but the killing, this base-born king kept his wits and moved us like pawns on a chessboard, we all unwitting. First, he drew us into ambush, and now he thrusts us into a chasm. We war-wise fighters, grown gray in battle, checkmated by a boy!'

Nevertheless, though wearied, full of dread and shame, and looking death in the eyes, the little band of men withdrew backwards, waiting until Arthur should command his lines of glittering knights to dash upon the remnant of the rebel kings.

'The proud evil men!' said Arthur in anger, looking upon them. 'Though they know death is upon them, they will not crave mercy of me, a base-born king, as they name me!'

'Ah, sir king,' said King Ban, 'blame them not, for they do as brave men ought to do, and they are the best fighting men and the knights of most prowess that ever I saw. And if they were belonging unto you, there would be no king under heaven to compare with you for power and fame and majesty.'

'I cannot love them,' said Arthur sadly, 'for they would destroy me.'

'Now, this is my counsel,' said King Lot to his ten fellows, as he looked over the field strewn with the dead: 'that we stand together in a circle and swear to die together—we and our few knights.

We have aimed at a kingdom and a crown, and we have failed. But we will die like kings and warriors. When they press upon us at the last, let no one of us break away. If any see another dress him to flee or to yield, let him slay him. How say ye?'

'It is good!' said they all.

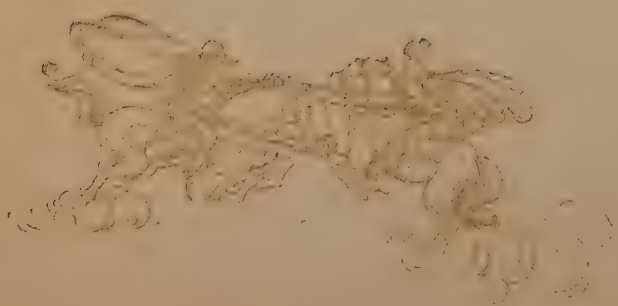
Then, for all their aching wounds, they mended their broken harness hurriedly, and righted their shields, took new spears from the hands of their squires, and set them upright on their thighs, and thus, with the low red light of the westering sun behind them, they stood still and grim, like a clump of tall leafless trees.

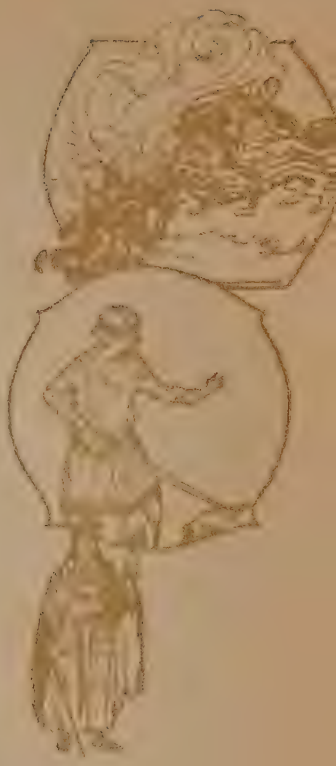
Arthur gave the order to advance, and his knights leaped forward over the heap of the slain. But just then Sir Kay came to the king, bringing a knight from the north who had just been captured, bearing messages to the eleven kings, and Arthur asked him who he was and why he came.

'Sir king,' said the man, 'I am Sir Eliot of the March Tower, and I have ill tidings for my master, King Uriens, and his friends, but it seems my news is no worse than their fate. If my great lord is to die, I would lief die with him. Therefore, lord, dispatch me now, or let me go stand beside my lord in the last rally.'

'What is thy news?' asked King Arthur.

'It is that the pagans, the savage Saxons, have landed in three places beyond Humber, and all the lands of my lord and his ten fellows shall suffer fire and sword again.'





'But if I slay your master and his fellow-rebels, whose lands are those the pagans overrun?'

'Yours, lord, of a truth, if you can dash the pagans from them.'

'If I and my host have swept these rebel kings from before me, think you I cannot sweep the Saxons from the land?'

'I trow you could, sir king, for on my way hither I have heard of the marvelous deeds this day of yourself and your knights. But, lord, I see the press of knights about my dear lord. Ah, that I might strike a blow for him before I die!'

'Thou shalt strike a-many yet,' said Arthur, and Sir Eliot marveled.

Arthur commanded his trumpets to blow the retreat, and the knights, wondering and half unbelieving, withdrew them from about the eleven kings.

Then, surrounded by his chief lords, Arthur rode to the group of wearied kings, who, with dented and broken harness, from which the blood oozed in many places, still kept their seats with undaunted mien.

At King Arthur's command Sir Eliot told his news to King Uriens.

'Now this I have to say to ye,' said Arthur, lifting his vizor and showing a stern countenance. 'Ye are in my hands, to slay or spare as I choose. But ye have fought like brave men, and I would that, for your prowess, ye were my friends rather than mine enemies. Now this I have to offer ye. Swear here and now to be my lieges, as ye were to King Uther before me, and I will aid thee to

thrust the pagans from your land, and thenceforth we will aid and cherish each other as true subjects and true lords should do. But if ye refuse, then your folly be on your own heads, for then I take your lives and your lands both.'

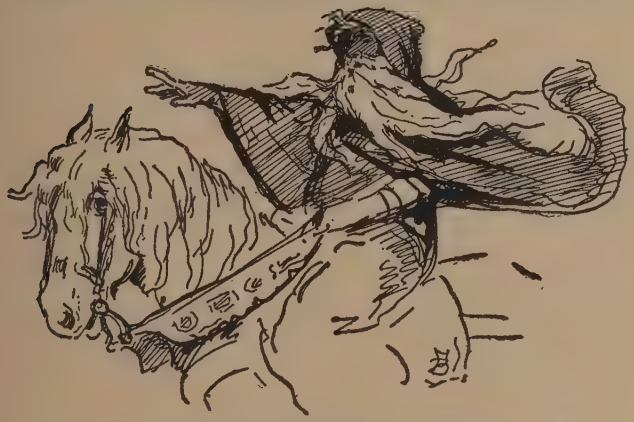
With that King Uriens threw down his sword and put up his vizor, and turning to the others, said: 'Fellow-rebels, we should be mad to refuse gifts so kingly and kindly offered. We have tried a throw with this young king, and we have been worsted. Better now to own ourselves lesser men than this wise lad here, and try to live in peace with him henceforth.'

The other kings agreed, but King Lot, mean and revengeful, and the Kings Nentres and Brandegoris, suspicious that, as had been too often with themselves, their words had covered foul intent, held back a little, until the others swore to leave them to the penalty of their folly. Whereupon they all knelt down upon the stricken field, and each put his hands between the hands of King Arthur, and swore upon the honor of their knighthood to be his true and faithful men while they lived.

As they rose from rendering their homage, Merlin came riding on a great black horse.

'Ye have done wisely well, my king,' he said. 'For by this kingly deed you shall rivet the hearts of the good men among these former rebels closer to your own than with rivets of steel. Thus well and wisely have ye won your kingdom and the fealty of these brave men.'

'Now,' he went on to the eleven kings, 'ye doubted whether Arthur was of noble birth, and rightful king. Know ye that he is the son of the noble King Uther, who by my counsel hid him away on his birth. Ye will remember how Gorlois, Duke of Cornwall, hated Uther for taking Igraine for wife, whom Gorlois had captured and sworn to wed for her beauty and her wealth. And how all

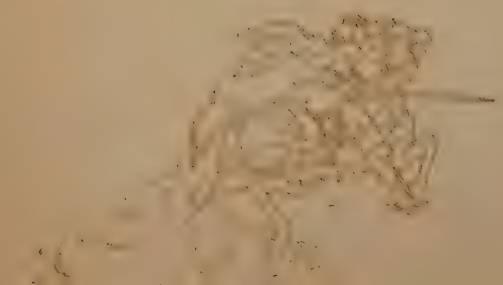


As they rose from rendering their homage, Merlin came riding on a great black horse.

the turbulent lords did cling to Gorlois, and how for years King Uther had much ado to keep those rebels from dismembering the kingdom. Gorlois had vowed to slay by poison or treachery any son of Uther's, and so I took young Arthur into safe keeping. None knew of him until King Uther named him as his rightful heir upon his deathbed

in the presence of you all. So, therefore, ye do well to give your homage to this your king, for Arthur is the son right worshipful of the great Pendragon, and the lovely lady, Igraine of Lyonesse.'

All that stood by marveled, and most of the eleven kings were glad that they had a king so noble in birth and doing as Arthur, the son of Uther Pendragon.



CHAPTER II

HOW LANCELOT WAS MADE A KNIGHT, THE FOUR WITCH QUEENS, AND THE ADVENTURES AT THE CHAPEL PERILOUS

When King Arthur was arrived at the age of twenty-five, his knights and barons counseled that he should take a queen, and his choice fell upon Gwenevere, the daughter of King Leodegrance, of the land of Cameliard. This damsel was the most beautiful and the most gracious in all the realm of Britain.

When the marriage was arranged between her father and Merlin, King Leodegrance said that, for her dowry, instead of broad lands, of which King Arthur had many, he would give to Arthur the Table Round, which Uther Pendragon had in friendship given to him many years before. For, as King Arthur was already famous for his prowess and nobleness and his love of knightly men and brave deeds, Leodegrance knew that this would be a gift beloved of Arthur.

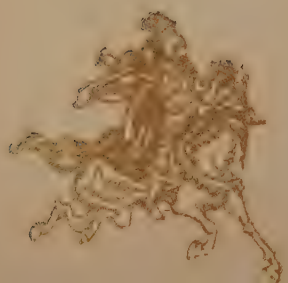
With the table were to go the knights who were its company. It seated one hundred and fifty when it was complete, but many had been slain, and now they numbered but a hundred.

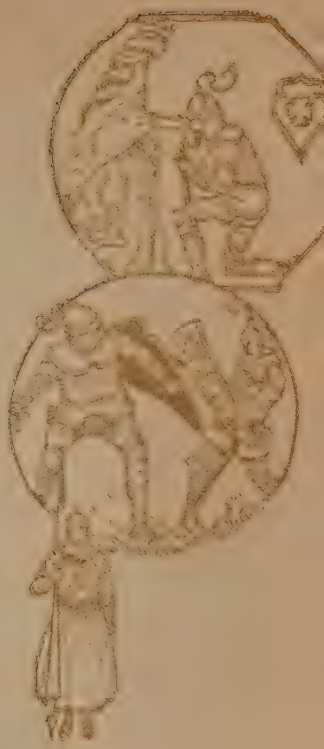
When King Arthur heard from Merlin of the coming of Gwenevere, with the hundred knights bearing the Round Table with them, he was very glad, 'for,' said he, 'their noble company pleaseth me more than great riches.' He charged Merlin to go and espy through all the land of Britain for another fifty knights, so that the tale of the noble company of the Round Table should be complete.

Now, it chanced that while Arthur sat in the hall of his palace at London, waiting for Gwenevere to come to him, and for Merlin to return from his quest, King Ban, who had aided him in his fierce battle against the eleven knights, sent his young son Lancelot to Arthur's court, to learn knightly deeds and noble prowess.

None knew who he was but Arthur, who kept the matter secret. Many had smiled at the huge limbs of Lancelot, until his great strength had caused them to respect him; and being but a young man he had not yet got all the courtly bearing and noble manners for which in later time he was famous throughout all Christendom. So that many knights and ladies smiled sourly upon him, but others saw that he would shortly prove a fine man of his hands, full courteous and gentle, and of a noble nature and great presence.

At the court was also young Gawaine, son of King Lot, and nephew of the king. Both Lancelot and Gawaine were as yet not knighted, but together they tilted at each other in the lists beyond the walls, and spent their days in sword-play and all knightly exercises. Lancelot was the





stronger and better fighter; and though Gawaine never overcame him, yet did they twain love each other passing well.

Now Gawaine went to the king one day, and asked of him a gift, and King Arthur said he would grant it.

'Sir,' said Gawaine, while Lancelot stood a little way off, fondling the hounds that licked at his hand, 'I ask that ye will make me knight the same day that ye shall wed fair Gwenevere.'

'I will do it with a good will,' said the king. 'And Lancelot,' he said, calling to the young man, 'have ye no boon to ask of me?'

'Not at this time, sir,' replied Lancelot, 'but in a little while I may.'

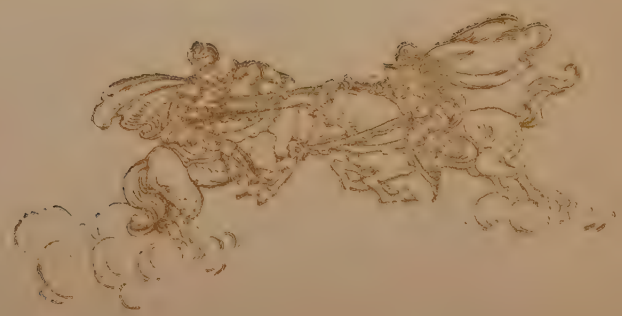
Into the hall next day, as the king sat at dinner, came an old woman, bent and feeble, but with reverend white hair and gentle face, and she kneeled at the king's feet.

'What is it, dame?' said Arthur. 'What is't you crave?'

'Justice, lord king,' she said in a weak voice, while the tears gushed from her eyes. 'Or else I die beside the gate where you do give the justice that all men praise.'

'Who hath done evil to you?' said the king.

'Sir Caradoc of the Dolorous Tower in the Marsh,' replied the old woman. 'I and my son, lord, did build a little hut of wattle on a little plot which we banked from the marsh, near the great wall of the rich baron, deeming it safe to rest within the shadow of the strong lord, and though his hard



rule was hateful to those whom he oppressed, we were so humble that we thought he would not notice us. And meagerly we reared our living from the ground, and sold our poor herbs to Sir Caradoc his steward, or to the people in the villages in the marsh about us. But soon the Lord Caradoc desired the land on which our little hut was standing, to make his lands the broader. He tore our poor home down, and scattered all, and thrust us out to wander in the marshes; and when my poor son pleaded with the lord, he had him whipped, and he was brought and cast half dead at my feet as I waited outside the hall. Now if thou givest us not justice, we shall surely die.'

'Doth any know Sir Caradoc?' asked the king of his knights.

'Yea, sir,' said one, 'and he is a great man of his hands, fierce and bold, of strong family, and his brother is Sir Turquine of Camber, who tried to slay thee at Caerleon, and was with the eleven kings in battle. Sir Caradoc liveth in a strong tower beyond the marshes to the south of the river, and he slayeth all that desire to pass them, unless they pay him for all he demands.'

'What!' said the king with fierce anger, 'within a few miles of this my justice-seat doth such tyranny rule unchecked, and ye tell me naught of it? Are ye then more fearful of this marsh robber than of me your king?'

The knights hung their heads abashed, and were silent.

Then Lancelot came and stood before the king.

'Let me, sir king, go and summon this tyrant to your presence,' he said, 'so that this poor dame may have justice, and that ye may punish him for his oppression.'

'I fear me, Lancelot, thou art over young for so fierce a knight,' said Arthur.

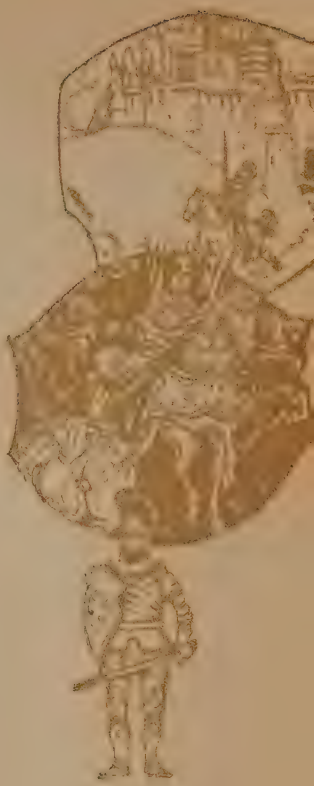
'I shall but bear thy words, sir,' said Lancelot, 'and he will not harm thy messenger.'

'Take two stout men-at-arms with you, then,' said Arthur, 'and say to this Sir Caradoc that if he come not back with thee to answer unto me, I will come and take his life and burn his evil tower to the ground.'

Many of the younger men that had despite against Lancelot for his great prowess at the sword and the lance thought that now, indeed, they would be ridded of him, for they deemed Sir Caradoc would slay him.

Two days later came young Lancelot back with his two men-at-arms, and with them, bound upon a great horse, was a full fierce and raging knight, red of face, large of body, his clothes all tossed and torn, and his mouth full of dire threatenings against Lancelot. Men made way for them marveling, and together Lancelot and his captive rode up the hall to the king.

'Here, lord, is Sir Caradoc of the Dolorous Tower in the Marsh,' said Lancelot. 'He would not come when I gave him your message, so I bided my time until he was sunk in wine, and was sleeping alone, and I have brought him secretly from his hold. Now, lord king, I think Sir Cara-



doc would joust with me, if you will give me knighthood.'

'Joust with thee, thou smooth-faced boy!' cried Sir Caradoc, straining at his bonds. 'I will spit thee on my lance if I may get at thee, and when thou art slain I will fight with this little king of thine—and his death shall wipe out this insult thou hast put upon me!'

At his rage and fierce bearing men marveled and many were afeared, seeing that Sir Caradoc was great in lands and kinsmen, and big of his body.

'Thou art full young, Lancelot,' said Arthur, 'to joust with so strong a knight. Let an older man have ado with him.'

'Sir king,' cried Lancelot eagerly, 'I claim the first battle with this strong tyrant. He is my captive, and I claim it.'

'Have it as ye will,' said Arthur, 'and God speed you. But I misdoubt me much 'twill end in your sorrow.'

'Ay, and thine too, thou gentle lady's knight!' sneered Sir Caradoc.

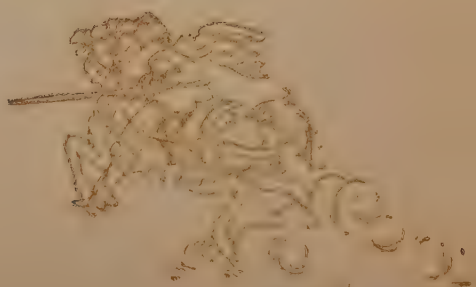
'Peace, man, peace,' said the king sternly. 'I think God will fight in this battle, for I have inquired far, and the tale of thy evil deeds is overful.'

Therewith King Arthur made young Lancelot knight, and men eagerly rushed away to the tilting-ground to see the battle between the virgin knight, Sir Lancelot, and the old robber knight, Sir Caradoc. And when Sir Caradoc was released and

armed, he laughed and shook his lance, so sure was he of revenge right speedily.

Then they hurtled together most fiercely, and young Sir Lancelot was thrust from his horse by Sir Caradoc. Quickly he rose from the ground, and dressed his shield and drew his sword, and cried, 'Alight, Sir Caradoc, for I will fight thee on foot.' But Sir Caradoc, being traitorous, rode at Sir Lancelot with his spear, as if he would pin him to the earth, and the young knight had much ado to avoid him. All the knights cried out upon Sir Caradoc for a foul knight, and for shame he threw down his lance and alighted, and rushed at Sir Lancelot full fiercely, in order to slay him instantly.

But that was not easily to be done, for however wise Sir Caradoc was in sword-play, he was mad with wrath, and therefore thought of naught but to slay his enemy instantly. He raged like a wild boar, and gave Sir Lancelot many evil strokes, yet never did he beat down the young knight's guard. Soon men perceived that Sir Caradoc's great fierceness was causing him to make blind strokes, and then Sir Lancelot seemed the more wary. Suddenly they saw the young knight leap forward, and beat so heavily upon the other's helm that it cracked. Sir Caradoc strove to guard himself, but Sir Lancelot was so wroth, and so mighty of his blows, that he could not. At last Sir Lancelot beat him to his knees, and then thrust him groveling to the ground. Sir Lancelot bade him yield, but he would not, and still sought to thrust



at the other. Then the young knight struck at him between the neck and the head and slew him.

Both the knights and the common people shouted with joy, and acclaimed Sir Lancelot as a noble and mighty knight. But the young man was full modest, and withdrew from the press. King Arthur gave unto him the Dolorous Tower and the lands which had belonged to Sir Caradoc, and Lancelot caused the old dame and her son to be given a fair piece of land and a hut, and many other wrongs and evil customs that had been done by Sir Caradoc, Sir Lancelot caused to be righted.

The kinsmen of Sir Caradoc went apart and conspired to have Sir Lancelot slain, but for a long time they could not come at him.

Then, when the queen came unto King Arthur, there was great feasting and joustings and merry games, and Sir Lancelot, for his knightly prowess in the lists, and for his gentle courtesy and noble manners to all, both poor and rich, high and low, was sought by many, and for some time rested himself in knightly games and play.

Then, on a day in June, when a sudden wind from a lattice blew upon his face as he laughed and jested with ladies and knights in silks and rich garments, he bethought him of the fair green woods and the wide lands through which lonely roads were winding. And departing from the hall forthwith, he bade his horse and arms be brought to him, and rode into a deep forest, and thought to prove himself in strange adventures.

Thus faring, he rode for two days and met with naught. On the third day the weather was hot about noon, and Sir Lancelot had great list to sleep. He espied a great apple-tree full of white blossoms, and a fair shadow was beneath it, and he alighted and tied his horse unto a thorn, and laid his helmet under his head and slept.

While he thus lay, there rode by him on white mules four ladies of great estate, with four knights about them, who bore a canopy of green silk on four spears, so that the high sun should not touch the faces of the ladies. Then, as they rode by, they heard a war-horse grimly neigh, and looking aside, they were aware of Sir Lancelot all armed, and asleep under the apple-tree.

The ladies came nigh him, and of them there was Queen Morgan le Fay, who was wife of King Lot, and an evil witch; the Queen of Northgales, a haughty lady; the Lady of the Out-Isles; and the Lady of the Marshes. And when the Lady of the Marshes saw the knight she cried:

'Now this is as good hap as ever could be, for this is he that slew my brother, Sir Caradoc of the Dolorous Tower; and for revenge of that, I would have this knight taken to my tower and torture him before I slay him.'

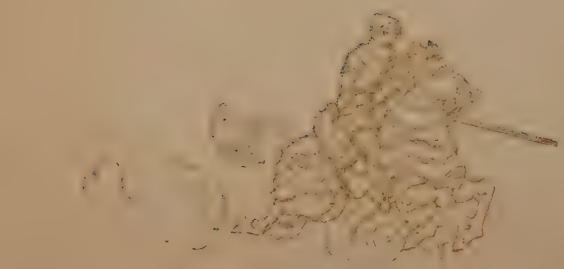
'That is well said,' said Morgan le Fay, 'for he bids fair to be one of the most strong knights of Arthur, whom I hate. This man, Sir Lancelot du Lake is the favorite of all the ladies at that court, who hate me. So will I lay an enchantment on him, so that he shall sleep.'

Then the evil queen laid her hands over the face of Sir Lancelot, and said strange words that none could understand, and then he was laid across the crupper of one of the knights' horses, and he did not wake.

When in the twilight Sir Lancelot awoke, he found himself on a straw pallet in a strange room, and he leaped up and went to a narrow arrow-slit in the wall and looked out. Before him for a great distance was a black watery land, with the sun sinking far away on the very edge, and the pools of the marsh were as if they were of blood.

Then he beat at the door and called, but none responded, and for wrath he could have dashed the door down, but it was too stout, and he had no weapon; for his arms had been taken from him.

When it was dark, suddenly it seemed to Sir Lancelot that the room smelled foul, as if he had been carried into the midst of the quaking marsh, and was sunk deep in the slime and weeds of a pool. Then, through the arrow-slit, he saw many strange lights come, dim and blue like the wild lights that dance and flit over the lonely marshes by night; but that which made him marvel was that these lights were two together, as if they were the eyes of evil things. And they came up to him with a breath that was cold and dank, and they seemed to peer into his face, but he could see naught of their bodies. The hair upon his head rose, and his skin went cold. They pressed all about him, and to defend himself he struck at the eyes, but his blows beat only the air. Then sud-



"These my mistresses bid me say shall be your food until you die."

denly Sir Lancelot felt sharp pains, as if small keen knives had been thrust into his flesh at many places. The stabs increased in number and in pain, and Sir Lancelot beat about himself and ran to and fro in the narrow chamber to escape the evil eyes and the stabs, but it was in vain, and thus all night in much misery he suffered. When for sheer weariness he lay down and tried to close his eyes, the evil things would not let him, but ever they tore at him and stabbed him. He was in anguish of mind more than he could bear, and for all his thought he could not think of any way to fight against the evil powers which followed and tortured him wherever he ran.

But at dawn they fled, and then the door of the room opened, and a damsel appeared, and in her hands was a manchet of sour bread, and a beaker of water from the ditch of the moat. The damsel was evilly clad in rags, and seemed like a scullion-maid.

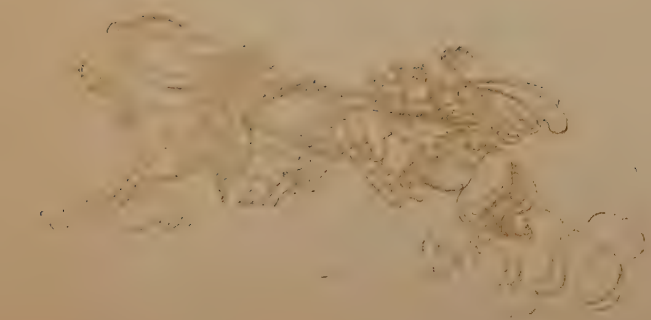
'These,' she said, 'my mistresses bid me say shall be your food until you die.'

'Damsel,' said Lancelot, 'tell me who hath brought me here and used me so evilly.'

'It is Queen Morgan le Fay,' said the damsel, 'and the three witch queens, the Queen of North-gales, the Queen of the Out-Isles, and the Lady of the Marshes.'

'I doubt not, then, that they would slay me?' said Lancelot. 'But why hate they me?'

'It is for this,' went on the damsel, 'that you did



slay Sir Caradoc, the brother of the Lady of the Marshes.'

'Alas, then,' said Sir Lancelot, 'there is no pity for me, and none of my dear friends shall learn of my shameful death.'

'And so that you should suffer much ere you are slain,' went on the damsel, 'they sent in the night the Coranians, the marsh fiends, to torture you. Thus will they do until you die, unless, sir knight, you are a knight with a stout heart, and a good fighter, and will do me justice. If you will be ruled by me, and will give me a promise, I will aid you.'

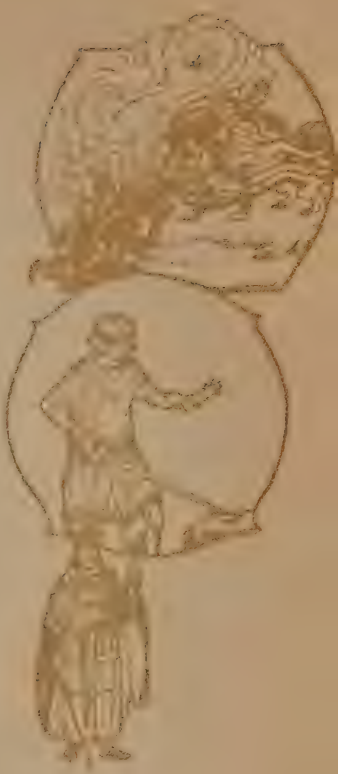
'Damsel, that will I grant you,' said Lancelot, 'for this would be an evil death for a knight. And full of terror hath been this night, from the foul things which have beset me.'

'I may not stay further now,' said the maid, 'lest they think I tarry over-long. But by evening I will come again.'

The day passed and twilight came, and Sir Lancelot was adread for fear of the night. But anon the damsel came secretly to him and said:

'Now must you promise me this, that you will release my father, whom Sir Turquine, Sir Caradoc's brother, hath kept in his foul dungeons since I was but a little child. And all his lands did Sir Turquine rob from him, and me he gave as a kitchen slut to Morgan le Fay, and evilly have I been treated who am a good knight's daughter. Now, will ye promise to free my father?'

'That will I, my poor damsel,' said Lancelot,



'and I will, God aiding me, slay this Sir Turquine as I slew Sir Caradoc his brother.'

So at the dead of night the damsel opened his door, and with the keys that she had stolen, she opened twelve other locks that stood between them and the postern door. Then she brought him to

He mounted and took the maid with him.

his armor, which she had hidden in a bush, and she led forth his horse, and he mounted with much joy, and took the maid with him, and she showed him the way to a convent of white nuns, and there they had good cheer.

Then, on the morrow, she led him to a thick forest with many hills therein, and anon they came to a fair ford, and over the ford there grew a tree, and on it there hung many good shields, each with the device of some knight thereon, and Sir Lancelot was astounded to see the shields of many of King Arthur's knights hung there. And on a bole of the tree there was a bason of copper.

'Now,' said the damsel, 'I have brought you here where is Sir Turquine, the mightiest knight that ever was found, as men say, and was never overmatched by any. And in his dungeons are many poor knights, and my dear father, Sir Darrel. Now strike the bason with the butt of your spear.'

Sir Lancelot beat such strokes that the bason burst asunder, and then he was aware of a great knight riding on a black horse. 'This is he,' said the damsel, 'and now God aid you!'

'What needest thou, sir knight?' cried the other.

'To try my strength on thee,' cried Lancelot, 'for thou hast done great despite and shame unto many good knights of the Round Table.'

'Art thou of that caitiff crew of ladies' knights?' sneered Sir Turquine. 'Then I defy thee.'

'Thou hast said enough,' replied Lancelot.

They put their spears in their breasts, and came like the wind against each other, and either smote other in the middle of their shields, so that both their horses' girths broke. Then, lightly avoiding their beasts, they came at each other with great fierceness, and so fared for two hours, feinting and striking, and so heavy were their blows that each

bled from many wounds as they stood. At last, for sheer breathlessness, each leaned upon his sword.

'Now, fellow,' said Sir Turquine haughtily, 'answer me these questions I shall put to thee.'

'Say on,' said Lancelot.

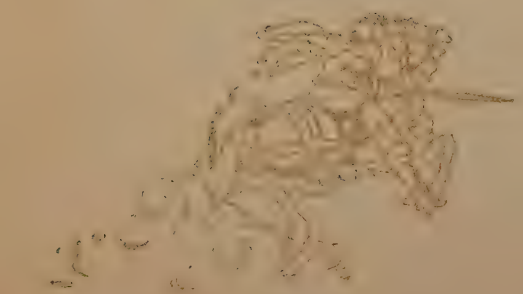
'Thou art,' went on Sir Turquine, 'the biggest man that ever I met with, and like one knight that I hate above all others, and I would liefer be thy friend than thy foe. Now, therefore, I will give up to thee my captive knights if thou wilt tell me thy name, and if thou art not the knight I hate most.'

'Willingly,' said Sir Lancelot. 'But what knight hatest thou above all other? And why?'

'It is Sir Lancelot du Lake,' cried the knight, 'for he slew my brother Sir Caradoc of the Dolorous Tower in the Marsh, who was one of the best knights living. And ever I have sought this Lancelot, and slain and maimed many good knights and imprisoned others in the quest. To slay that fellow I have made a vow, and him I would meet above all others.'

'Ha!' laughed Sir Lancelot, 'and I am the first thou hast met whose love thou wouldst liefer have than my hatred? Well, I will have thee to wit that I am he ye seek, Sir Lancelot du Lake, and thy brother was an evil knight and an oppressor.'

'What sayest thou?' cried Sir Turquine. 'Thou art he I seek? Then, Lancelot, thou art unto me most welcome as ever was any knight, for we shall never part till the one of us be dead.'



Then they ran at each other like two wild boars, lashing and dashing with their swords and shields, so that sometimes in their fury they slipped together on the grass, which was wetted with blood, and fell striking at each other. But at last Sir Turquine waxed faint and tried to avoid Sir Lancelot's blows, and his shield sank low, for his arm was very weary. Seeing this, Sir Lancelot leaped upon him fiercely, and got him by the banner of his helmet, and thrust him on his knees, and slew him at a stroke.

When he had rested a while, he went to the castle of Sir Turquine and released all his prisoners, and was rejoiced to see the damsel find her father alive. He caused the old knight to have his lands again, and bade the others that they should betake themselves to the court of King Arthur to be cheered and comforted, while their possessions, which Sir Turquine had robbed them of, should be given back to them.

Then fared Sir Lancelot further afield, glad exceedingly that he had escaped the foul plots of the four witch queens, and also that he had vanquished the evil Sir Turquine.

Then he rode a great while in a deep and dark forest, and as he followed the winding ways, suddenly he saw a black hound before him, with its nose to the ground as if seeking a scent. He followed the beast, and ever she looked behind her. Soon she left the forest, and picked her way through a great marsh, and Sir Lancelot followed, until in the wide distance he saw a little

hill with trees upon it, and in the midst a ruined manor.

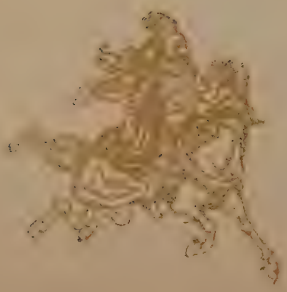
The hound went towards the ruin and Sir Lancelot followed. The wall was broken down in many places and the path all overgrown and weedy, and as he came to the courtyard before the house, he saw the fishponds choked with weeds and the horseblock green with moss, and in the great doorway grew charnel and hellebore, and the spiked hemlock waved and spilt its seed in the wind. The windows hung by their hinges, and the green moss crept down the wide wet cracks in the walls.

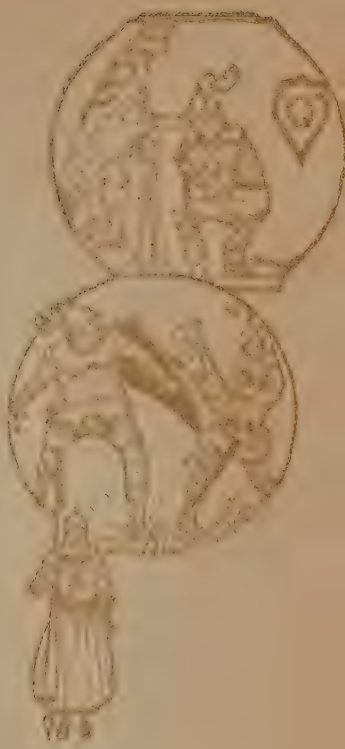
But the dog ran over the drawbridge into the house, and Sir Lancelot gat from his horse and tethered it to the post beside the horseblock, and so went across the bridge, which was full sodden and worm-eaten, and bent beneath his weight.

Coming into a great hall, foul with many rotting leaves, he saw a table in the midst thereof, and on it was a knight that was a seemly man, and he lay as if he were dead, and the black hound licked his wound. And by his side there was a lovely lady, who started up, weeping and wringing her hands, and she said:

'O knight, too much evil have you brought to me!'

'Why say ye so?' said Sir Lancelot; 'I never did harm to this knight, for hither did this hound lead me, and therefore, fair lady, be not displeased with me, for grief is upon me for your sorrow and your sadness.'



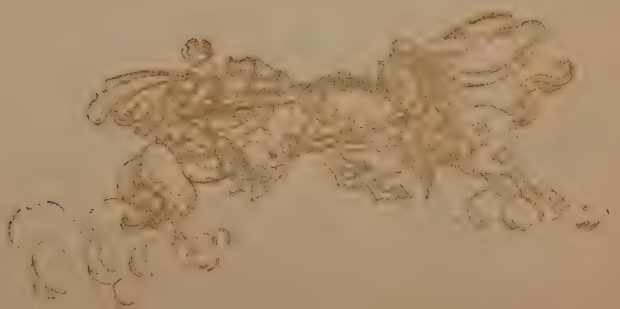


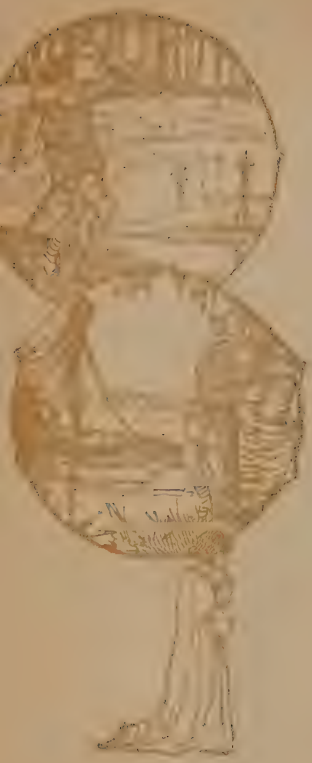
'Truly, sir,' said the lady, and she laid her face in her hands and sobbed full sorely, so that Sir Lancelot was much stirred thereat, 'I trow, as ye say it, that you are not the knight that hath near slain my love and my husband. And never may he be healed of his deadly wound except some good knight aid me. But he must be so bold and valiant a man, that never, I think, may I find such a one in the little time I have before my dear lord shall die!'

'Now on the honor of my knighthood,' replied Sir Lancelot, 'I do not presume that I am such a one as you desire; but if I may aid you and ease your sorrow, that would I do most willingly. What is it I should do?'

'Oh, sir knight!' cried the lady, and her lovely eyes looked full thankfully at Sir Lancelot, 'if ye would, it were the greatest deed you have ever done, however bold a knight ye may be. For this my lord is sore wounded by a knight whom he met in the forest this day, and by one thing only may he be made whole. For there is a lady, a sorceress, that dwelleth in a castle here beside, and she hath told me that my husband's wounds may never be whole till I may find a knight that would go at midnight into the Chapel Perilous beside the Mere, and that therein he should find before the high altar a sword, and the shroud in which the dead wizard-knight is lapped, and with that sword my husband's wounds should be searched, and a piece of the shroud bind them.'

'This is a marvelous thing,' said Sir Lancelot,





'and I will essay it. But what is your husband's name?'

'Sir,' she said, 'his name is Sir Meliot de Logres.'

'That me repenteth,' said Sir Lancelot, 'for he is a fellow of the Round Table, and for him will I do all in my power.'

Going to the table, he looked upon the ashen face of the wounded man, and it was Sir Meliot, even as the lady said.

'Now, sir,' said the lady, when Sir Lancelot had mounted his horse, 'do ye follow that hard way across the marsh, and it will lead ye by midnight to the Chapel Perilous, and may ye speed well.'

Right so, Sir Lancelot departed, and the sun was near its setting.

For some hours Sir Lancelot fared across the marsh, until it was deep night, save for the stars; then he came upon a broad road, grass-grown and banked high, where the night wind piped in the long grass. This he knew was a road which the great Roman necromancers had wrought, and he thought he had missed his way, for there was no other path.

As he stood marveling, the figure of a man, tall and gaunt and but half clad, came down the broad road towards him, and cried in a hollow voice:

'For the love of charity, sir knight, give to a poor man who is an outcast.'

Sir Lancelot pitied the sunken eyes of the poor man, and gave him alms.

'God give thee comfort, poor soul,' said the knight, 'and get thee a roof, for the night wind blows chill.'

'God bless thee, sir knight,' said the man, in awful tones, 'for courtesy and pity such as thine are rare. Whither goest thou this night?'

'I seek the Chapel Perilous,' said Lancelot.

At which the shape threw back its head and cried as if with great sorrow.

'God fend thee, sir knight,' he said, 'and bring thee safe alive. What thou gettest there, keep thou in thy hands until the dawn, or thy soul shall suffer death.'

Then he vanished, and Sir Lancelot knew it had been a phantom.

Then as he crossed himself, he looked up, and through some thin and withered trees a little way off upon a slope he saw the shimmer of light, as if a chapel was lit up. He went towards it, and he saw a high wall that was broken down in many places, and an old gray chapel beyond, and the windows were shimmering with a ghostly light. As he came through the trees he saw they were all dead, with neither leaf nor twig upon them, their roots were crooked out of the ground as if they would throw his horse, and their limbs were stretched as if they strained to clutch him.

Coming to the gate in the wall, his horse trembled and plunged, and would go no further; whereat Sir Lancelot alighted, and tied it to a

thorn-tree, and went through the gate. By the ghostly light that came from the windows of the ruined chapel he saw that under the eaves were hung fair shields, with rich devices and all were turned upside down. Many of them were those of knights he had known or heard of, long since dead or lost. When he had made a few steps on the grass-grown pathway towards the door, of a sudden he saw, coming from the church, thirty tall knights, each a foot higher than he, each in black armor, and each with sword uplifted, as they rushed towards him.

Their feet and their armor made no sound as they pressed forward, and a thin blue flame licked about each naked sword.

They came upon him, but Sir Lancelot, with a prayer to God, dressed his shield and sword and stood firm, though his flesh quaked and his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth. They moved and gnashed at him, and heaved their swords about him; then suddenly their vizors went up and he looked into their faces. And at that he was sore adread, for he knew they were dead men.

But he would not be overcome, and said in a loud voice:

'In the name of God, avaunt ye!'

He made a step forward, and they scattered before him, but followed closely behind. Then he went into the chapel, where he saw no light but a dim lamp burning upon the altar. It was an old, old chapel, with dust upon its floor like a thick carpet, the walls and windows were holed

and broken, and the timber of the seats was rotten.

He went up to the high altar, and saw before it a trestle, and upon it was a dead man, all covered with a cloth of silk. Sir Lancelot stooped down, and with his sword cut a piece of that cloth away.

With that his blood seemed turned to water, and his feet seemed eager to run towards the door, for with a mighty roar the earth shook beneath him, and the walls of the chapel rocked. But he looked for the sword which he must take, and saw it under the trestle, and picked it up and went out of the chapel.

The ghosts of the knights pressed about him as he walked, and strove to tear the sword from his grasp. But he would not suffer them to take it, and when he reached the gate they could no further go, and so left him.

At the gate there came running up to him a fair damsel, crying to him:

'O brave knight, give me the sword and the cloth, that I may take them at once to my mistress, the lady of Sir Meliot, for he is at the point of death, and she is waiting in sorrow and tears beside him.'

But Sir Lancelot remembered the words of the phantom beggar, and made reply:

'Fair damsel, I shall take them myself to the lady of Sir Meliot, for these things I may not give to any until the dawning.'

The damsel would have torn the sword and the

cloth full hastily from his hands, but he was aware of her intent, and hindered her, and bade her in the name of God to withdraw.

Whereat, with a great shriek, she vanished.

'Now,' said Sir Lancelot, 'may God, who has brought me through these evil adventures, shield me from any further subtle crafts of these foul things.'

Straightway he mounted his horse, and took his way towards the marsh, so that he should give the sword and the cloth into the hands of the lady of Sir Meliot, for the healing of her lord.

But at the dawn Merlin met him.

'Sir Lancelot,' said the old white wizard, 'ye have no need to go to the ruined manor, except ye would have the proof of what I tell you.'

'And what is that?' asked Sir Lancelot.

'That all that hath befallen thee hath been done by evil magic,' replied Merlin. 'The black dog that led thee to the manor was a fiend, the fair lady that entreated ye was an evil witch, and she and the damsel at the chapel were the same, and all was caused by the witch queens who had you in their tower; and the likeness of the wounded knight to Sir Meliot was formed by wizardry. They that craved your death did hope that ye would fail at the terrors of the Chapel Perilous, and that your soul would be lost as have the souls of those evil or weak knights whose ghosts assailed ye. But by your courage and great heart ye won through all.'

'This is a great marvel,' said Sir Lancelot, 'and

I thank God that He hath shielded me of His mercy.'

When Sir Lancelot was returned to Camelot, and Merlin had told King Arthur of the knight's adventures, the king made him one of the knights of the Round Table.

'Ye do well,' said Merlin privily unto the king, 'for he shall prove the most man of worship that is in the world, and all your court and all your Round Table shall be by him made more famous than by any knight now living. Yet shall he not be one of those three that shall achieve the Holy Graal.'

CHAPTER III

OF SIR LANCELOT AND THE FAIR MAID OF ASTOLAT

It befell on a time that King Arthur made proclamation of a great joust and tournament which should be holden at Camelot fifteen days after the Feast of the Assumption. The noise of it went forth throughout all the king's dominions, and knights and barons, and earls and kings, made haste to get them ready to go thither.

Sir Lancelot had but lately been sore wounded, and told the king that he could not hope to be at the joust, for fear that his wound might break forth afresh. The king was much aggrieved thereat, and would fain have made proclamation to put off the joust, but that many knights were already set forth from distant places, and great would be the disappointment.

Therefore, on the day that the king was to journey from London to Camelot, he set forth with a heavy heart. For though he knew there would be many a brave onfall and stout bickering, yet, as Sir Lancelot had become the most valiant knight in all the island of Britain, the king had greatly desired that the knight should show how

he excelled all the doughty warriors that would come from all parts.

When all the knights had gone from the king's palace in London, Sir Lancelot pined in the great hall. The chatter of the ladies and the tricks of the pages became irksome to him, and he began to think how gay must be the company of the knights of the Round Table, as they rode through the leafy country ways towards Camelot, with the great Arthur at their head.

'I will see the king's leech,' he said to himself, 'and bid him give me some medicament that shall strengthen my wound. For I cannot abide that I stay here like some toothless old hound, while his fellows are gone to the hunting.'

So Sir Lancelot betook him to the lodging of Morgan Todd, the king's physician, but found that he too had gone with the king.

When Sir Lancelot was turning away, sore aggrieved and angry, the man that had opened the door to him cried:

'Be not vexed, Sir Lancelot, for I wot well you would rather go with the king than nurse that wound of thine. Come down, then, and let me advise thee.'

Sir Lancelot, thinking this would be the chief disciple or pupil of Morgan Todd, dismounted, and followed the man that had spoken, who was old and thin and gnarled, with beady black eyes. When he had examined Sir Lancelot's wound, the old man smiled strangely, and said:

'If ye take but common care of thy wound, 'twill

not break out again, but thy heart was ever bigger than thy wit, sir knight. Thou wilt do more than any other knight, and in thy strength ye may well maim yourself.'

'Then I may go to Camelot, to the jousting?' asked Sir Lancelot.

'Ay, ye may go,' said the leech. 'But hearken. Stay not on thy way to Astolat. If ye do so, ye shall leave so great a wound there on one that will not harm thee, that the ill shall cause thee woe out of all measure.'

'Keep thy counsel, good leech,' said Sir Lancelot with a laugh. 'I hurt none that desire not my hurt. And, for the rest, I will take the adventure that God will send me.'

Sir Lancelot set out forthwith, thinking naught of what the leech had said. By eventide he came to Astolat, and, looking about for a lodging, he suddenly remembered the words of the leech.

'I will beg a lodging outside the town,' he said, gravely smiling. 'So I do not stay in the town, I may escape the ill which the old croaker spoke of.'

He saw the manor-house of a baron beside the way, and begged a lodging there for the night, which was freely and most courteously granted unto him. The baron was an old man, of reverend aspect, named Sir Bernard, and he welcomed Sir Lancelot warmly, though he knew him not.

At meat they were all very merry, and with Sir Bernard were his two sons, handsome youths, but lately made knights. There was also a young damsel, named Elaine the Fair, the daughter of Sir

Bernard; but Sir Lancelot, though he saw how sweet and gentle she was, noted her not overmuch. Neither she nor Sir Lavaine, the younger son, could bear to take their eyes from the face of Sir Lancelot; for there was so magnificent yet gentle an air about the great knight, that they deemed he must be some very brave and noble warrior.

Sir Lancelot told them it was in his mind to go to the jousts at Camelot. Laughingly he turned to Sir Bernard, and said:

'Fair sir, I would pray you to lend me a shield that may not be greatly known, for mine has been too much seen by warriors.'

'Sir,' replied the old baron, 'I will gladly give you your desire, for I am sure you are one of the likeliest knights of the world. This, my eldest son, Sir Tirre, whom you see hath yet the pallor of sickness, was hurt on the day on which the great Sir Tristram of Lyones gave him knighthood, and as he cannot now ride, ye shall have his shield.'

'Sir, I thank you,' replied Sir Lancelot, 'for showing me such friendship.'

'And I would crave a service of you,' went on Sir Bernard. 'My younger son here, Sir Lavaine, is eager to go out with some knight of proved valor and prowess; and as my heart goeth unto you, and believeth ye to be a knight of great nobility, I beseech you that you let him ride with you to-morrow.'

'I shall be pleased, indeed, to have the young knight to ride with me,' replied Sir Lancelot.

'Would it please you, sir,' asked Sir Bernard, 'to tell us your name?'

'Not at this time, sir,' replied Sir Lancelot, 'but if God give me grace at the jousts, and I win honor there, I will of a surety return and tell you.'

Sir Lancelot, with his nobleness and courtesy, and his tales of fair ladies and brave knights, so won upon them all that it was late ere they each departed to their beds. The maiden Elaine thought that she had never seen or heard of a knight so full of gentleness, yet withal martial of mien, as this stranger who would not tell his name.

In the morning Sir Lancelot made himself ready to depart, and the maid Elaine lingered long about her brother, and would never say that she had really buckled the last strap of his armor. Then, when at length she could keep them no longer, she came up to Sir Lancelot, with a face all pale and red by turns, yet striving to laugh away her fear.

'Sir,' she said, 'I wish you noble deeds at the jousts and much fame. Sir, I have never had a knight wear favor of mine. Therefore, lord, will you wear a token of mine in your helm for good fortune?'

Lancelot looked down into the lovely face and smiled:

'Fair damsel,' he said gently, 'if I granted you that, I should do more for you than ever I have done for any dame or damsel living.'

At that she thought he refused, and the tears sprang like jewels into her blue eyes, and she turned away.

Sir Lancelot was grieved to think his refusal hurt one that seemed so sweet and gentle. Then he re-

membered that he desired to go to the jousts disguised, and he bethought him that if he wore a lady's token in his helm, no one would recognise him, for all knew that never would he consent to wear such things in joust or tournament, as was the custom of many knights.

'Stay, fair damsel,' he said kindly, 'I will grant you to wear a token of yours upon my helm. Therefore bring it me.'

Instantly the face of Elaine shone with joy and pride as she looked up quickly at the great steel-clad figure on the horse beside her. Then, quickly running, she brought what she had in her mind he should wear.

'See,' she said, giving it into his hand, 'it is a sleeve of mine, of scarlet samite, embroidered with great pearls.'

'I will wear it at the jousts, fair maiden,' said he, 'for the sake of the kindness you and yours have shown me. And will you keep the shield which is mine own against the time when I shall return? For I will take thy brother's.'

'I will keep it in my own room,' said Elaine, 'and will see that it doth not tarnish.'

Then Sir Lancelot and young Sir Lavaine rode forth, each bearing a white shield, as if both were young knights who had not yet done some deed, in memory whereof they could blazon a device upon their shields.

So they rode to Camelot, where they found the narrow streets of the little town packed with the press of knights, dukes, earls and barons come to

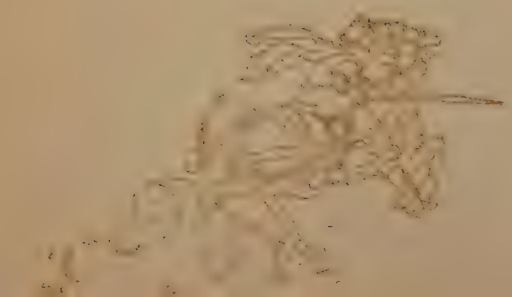
take part in the jousts. Sir Lancelot got them lodgings with a rich burgess, and so privily and closely did they keep the house that none knew that they were there.

On the day of the jousts the trumpets began to blow in the field where they should be held. King Arthur sat on a great scaffold which was raised at one end, to judge who did best in the jousting. So great was the press of folks, both noble and common, earls and chiefs, that many did marvel to think that the realm of Britain held so many people.

The knights held themselves in two parties and went to either end of the list. Some called themselves the band of Arthur, and would fight all comers; and among them was Sir Palomides, Sir Conn of Ireland, Sir Sagramore, Sir Kay the seneschal, Sir Griflet, Sir Mordred, Sir Gallermon, and Sir Saffre, all knights of the Round Table. On the other side were the King of Northgales, the King of Swordlands, Sir Galahalt the Proud, and other knights of the north. These were the smaller party, yet were they very valiant knights.

Sir Lancelot made him ready with the others, and fashioned the red sleeve upon his helm. But it was in his mind to see which party fared the worse before he would choose his part; for ever Sir Lancelot liked a task which was not easy.

So he rode forth with Sir Lavaine into a little wood upon a knoll, whence they could look into the list and see the knights hurtle and crash together. Soon they saw the knights of King Ar-



thur's band come against the northern knights, and many of the latter were smitten down. Then he saw how the King of the Northgales and the King of Swordlands with a few knights made a bold and brave stand against the many knights of King Arthur's Round Table.

'See,' said Sir Lancelot to Sir Lavaine, 'how that company of knights hold out against that great press! They are like brave boars in the midst of the hounds.'

'Ye say truth,' said Sir Lavaine; 'they are indeed brave souls.'

'Now,' said Sir Lancelot, 'if you will help me a little, you may see that great company go back more quickly than they came forward.'

'Sir, spare not,' said the young knight, 'and I will do what I may.'

Sir Lancelot spurred forward into the lists, and so fierce was his onslaught and so hard was his blow that with one spear he overthrew Sir Sagramore, Sir Kay, Sir Griflet and Sir Saffre, and with another spear he smote down five others. Thereupon the northern knights were much comforted, and greeted the strange knight full courteously, though they wondered that he had but a white shield.

Then the band of Arthur's knights took counsel and gathered together Sir Bors, Sir Ector de Maris, Sir Lionel, Sir Blamore and five others. These were all mighty knights and all were great fighters and close kin to Sir Lancelot. They resolved to rebuke the two stranger knights with white shields whom they knew not; and chiefly him

with the lady's sleeve upon his helm did they seek to bring to the dust.

Again the knights hurtled mightily together, and Sir Bors, Sir Ector and Sir Lionel drove at Sir Lancelot, and so great was their force that they smote Sir Lancelot's horse to the ground. By ill hap, the spear of Sir Bors pierced through his cousin's shield into his side, and the head of the lance broke off and remained in the wound.

Then Sir Lavaine, seeing his friend prone, did mightily assault Sir Mordred, who was on the other side, and hurled him to the ground; and, bringing Sir Mordred's horse to Sir Lancelot, he helped him to mount.

Sir Lancelot was exceedingly wroth, and took a great strong spear, and smote Sir Bors, both horse and knight, to the ground; and likewise he served Sir Ector and Sir Lionel, and four other knights. The others retreated, for they feared his great strength.

'I marvel who is that knight that hath the red sleeve in his helm?' said King Arthur to Sir Gawaine, who sat with him.

'Sir,' said the other, 'he will be known ere he depart.'

When the king caused the trumpet to sound the end of the day's jousting, the heralds cried that the prize was to go to the knight with the red sleeve. But when the northern knights came to Sir Lancelot and would have him go to the king and take the prize, he said:

'Fair lords, let me depart, I pray you. For I

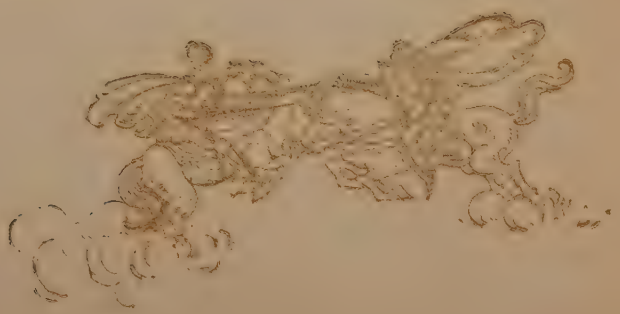
have bought my victory with my life; and now I would rather have quiet than all the wealth of the world.'

Forthwith he galloped away with Sir Lavaine until they came to a great forest; and then Sir Lancelot groaned and said he could no further go, and forthwith he fell from his horse in a great swoon. Sir Lavaine went to find water in the wood, and had to go far ere he found it. But presently he saw a clearing, and there was a little hermitage and a stream running by. Sir Lavaine called the hermit, who was a man full reverend and noble of aspect, and told him how his friend lay in a deathly swoon.

In a little while they had brought Sir Lancelot to the hermitage, where the hermit took out the head of the spear and bound up the wound and gave to the knight a strong cordial. Anon he was refreshed and came to his senses again.

At the lodging of the king in Camelot, men spoke of the jousts, and wondered who might be the knight who had won the prize and who had been injured, as the northern knights had reported. Though King Arthur had it in his mind that it had been Sir Lancelot, he hoped it was not, for it grieved him much to think that Sir Lancelot was so badly wounded.

Next day the court journeyed towards London, and rested for the night at Astolat; and the town being full, it chanced that Sir Gawaine went to the manor of Sir Bernard, which lay just outside the city. When he had dined, the old knight Sir Ber-



nard began to speak to him, and to ask who had done the best at the jousts at Camelot.

Ever since he had arrived, Sir Gawaine had seen how the fair girl, the daughter of the knight, who had attended upon him, was pale and thoughtful; and now she looked white and red by turns as he began to speak.

'There were two knights,' said Sir Gawaine, 'who each bore a white shield, and one had a red sleeve upon his helmet.'

Sir Gawaine saw how the damsel clasped her hands together, and her face lit up with a great light and her eyes were bright and proud.

'And I swear that never saw I so valiant and stout a knight as he,' said Gawaine. 'For I dare swear that he beat down twenty knights of the Round Table, and his fellow also did well.'

'Now, blessed be God,' said the fair maid of Astolat, with a great cry of joy, 'that the good knight sped so well; for he is the one man in the world whom I have ever loved, and truly he shall be the last man that ever after I shall love.'

'Then do ye know his name?' asked Sir Gawaine.

'Nay, I know it not,' said Elaine, 'nor whence he came. But I know that I love him and none other.'

Then they told Sir Gawaine how they had first had knowledge of the strange knight; and the damsel said that he had left her his shield in place of the white one he had taken, so that none should know him. Sir Gawaine begged that she would fetch it from her chamber.

Elaine brought it and drew it from the case of

"See, there is no spot of rust upon it, for I have cleaned it with my own hands every day."

leather in which she had wrapped it, and said, 'See, there is no spot of rust upon it, for I have cleaned it with my own hands every day.'

'Alas,' said Sir Gawaine, when he saw the device upon the shield, 'now is my heart full heavier than it hath ever been.'

'Why, oh why?' cried Elaine, and stood pale and breathless.

'Is the knight that owneth that shield your love?' asked Gawaine.

'Yes, truly,' said the maiden, 'I love him'; and then sadly she said, 'but would that he should tell me that I was also his love.'

'How ever that be,' said Sir Gawaine, 'you should know that you love the noblest knight in all the world, the most honorable and one of the most worth.'

'So thought me ever,' said the maid of Astolat, proudly smiling; 'for never have I seen a knight that I could love but that one.'

'And never hath he borne token or sign of any lady or gentlewoman before he bore thine,' said Sir Gawaine.

At these words the maid Elaine could have swooned for very joy, for she deemed that Sir Lancelot had borne her token for love of her. Therefore, she was cast more deeply in love with him than ever.

'But I dread me,' went on Sir Gawaine, 'for I fear we may never see him in this life again.'

'Alas! Alas!' cried Elaine, throwing herself at the feet of the knight, and clutching his arm tightly,

while she gazed with terror into his face. 'How may this be? Oh, say not—say not that he is—is——'

She could not say the word, but Sir Gawaine made answer.

'I say not so, but wit ye well that he is grievously wounded.'

'Alas!' cried Elaine, 'what is his hurt? Where is he? Oh, I will go to him instantly.'

She rose, wildly ringing her slender hands.

'Truly,' said Sir Gawaine, who, though a great warrior, was a slow talker, and had no thought of the sorrow of the poor maid, 'the man that hurt him was one that would least have hurt him had he known. And when he shall know it, that will be the most sorrow that he hath ever had.'

'Ah, but say,' cried Elaine, 'where doth my lord lie wounded?'

'Truly,' replied Gawaine, 'no man knoweth where he may lie. For he went off at a great gallop, and though I and others of King Arthur's knights did seek him within six or seven miles of Camelot, we could not come upon him.'

'Now, dear father,' said the maid Elaine, and the tears welled from her eyes, 'I require you give me leave to ride and seek him that I love, or else I know well that I shall go out of my mind, for I may never rest until I learn of him and find him and my brother Sir Lavaine.'

So the maid Elaine made her ready, weeping sorely, and her father bade two men-at-arms go with her to guard and guide her on her quest.

When she came to Camelot, for two days was her seeking in vain, and hardly could she eat or sleep for her trouble. It happened that on the third day, as she crossed a plain, she saw a knight with two horses, riding as if he exercised them; and by his gesture she recognized him at length, and it was her brother. She spurred her horse eagerly, and rode towards Sir Lavaine, crying with a loud voice:

'Lavaine, Lavaine, tell me how is my lord, Sir Lancelot?'

Her brother came forward, rejoicing to see her, but he asked how she had learned that the stranger knight was Sir Lancelot, and she told him.

'My lord hath never told me who he was,' said Lavaine, 'but the holy hermit who hath harbored him knew him and told me. And for days my lord has been wandering and distraught in his fever. But now he is better.'

'It pleaseth me greatly to hear that,' said Elaine.

When Sir Lavaine took her into the room where lay Sir Lancelot so sick and pale in his bed, she could not speak, but suddenly fell in a swoon. And when she came to her senses again she sighed and said:

'My lord, Sir Lancelot, alas, why are ye in so sad a plight?'

Therewith she almost swooned again. But Sir Lancelot prayed Sir Lavaine to take her up and bring her to him. And she came to herself again, and Sir Lancelot kissed her, and said:

'Fair maid, why fare ye thus? It hurts me to

see your sorrow, for this hurt of mine is of little account to cause you to grieve in this wise. If ye come to minister to me, why, ye are truly welcome, and ye shall quickly heal me, by the grace of God, and make me whole again.'

'I would gladly serve you till you are well again,' said the maid.

'I thank you, fair Elaine,' replied the knight, 'but I marvel how ye knew my name?'

'It was by Sir Gawaine, fair Lord,' said the damsel, 'for he lodged at my father's house and saw your shield.'

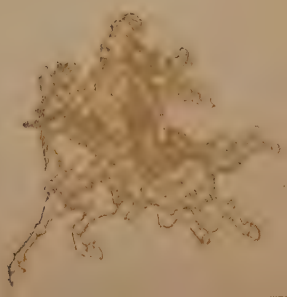
Sir Lancelot's heart was heavy at these words, for he foreboded sorrow from this adventure.

Afterwards the maid Elaine never went from Sir Lancelot, but watched him day and night, and gave such comfort to him that never woman did more kindly nurse a wounded man than she.

Sir Lancelot was full courteous and kindly in his turn, never giving more trouble than he could avoid; both were of good cheer and merry together, for Sir Lancelot deemed not as yet that the maid loved him deeply, and the maid was glad to be with him and to do him all the service that she could.

Then in a little while came Sir Bors, the knight who had wounded Sir Lancelot, who was also his cousin, and Sir Bors lamented sorely that his had been the arm that had given his kinsman so sore a wound. But Sir Lancelot prayed him not to grieve, and said:

'I have that which I deserved, for in my pride



I was nigh slain, for had I given thee, my cousin, warning of my being there, I had not been hurt. Therefore, let us leave off speaking thereof, and let us find some remedy so that I may soon be whole.'

'Fair cousin,' said Sir Bors, as he leaned on the bed, speaking in a low voice, 'there is one nigh thee, or I am much in error, that will not know whether to be glad or sorry when thou shalt be hale enough to ride away.'

'What dost thou mean?' asked Sir Lancelot.

'Is this she that is so busy about thee—is she the lady that men call the Lily Maid of Astolat?'

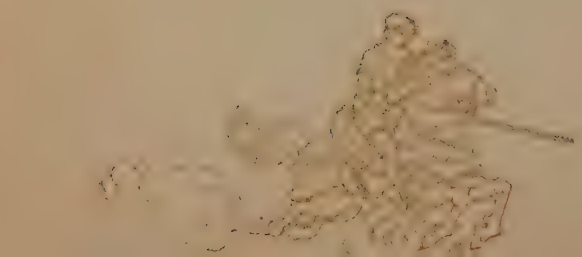
'She it is,' replied Sir Lancelot, 'and kindlier nurse hath never man found.'

'It is easy to see she loveth her task,' said Sir Bors, and he was full of pity and kindness for the fair meek maid, 'seeing that she loveth thee.'

'Nay, man, nay, that cannot be,' said Sir Lancelot, half angry, half denying. 'She hath come to me because I was sick, and because I wore her token in my helm, that's all.'

'Wise art thou in all knightly prowess, Sir Lancelot,' said Sir Bors, 'and full courteous and kindly art thou to all ladies and damsels. But I fear thou knowest not the heart of this fair maid. For it hath been easy for me to see by her looks this way how she is jealous of my talking to thee, and I know from her diligence about thee that she loveth thee with all her heart.'

'If that be so, then, by Heaven, I sorrow it is



so,' said Sir Lancelot heavily. 'And I must send her from me forthwith.'

'Why shouldst thou do that, fair cousin?' said Sir Bors. 'She is a passing fair damsel and well taught, and I would that thou couldst love her in return. But as to that, I may not nor dare not counsel thee. For I know that love blows where it listeth and will be forced by none.'

'It repenteth me sorely,' said Sir Lancelot, and he was heavy in spirit thereafter, and was eager to get whole again and to go away.

In four or five days he made a plot with Sir Bors, that he should rise and clothe himself in his armor and get upon his horse, and in this way show to the hermit and to the maid Elaine that indeed and in truth he was strong enough to ride forth. Therefore they made excuses and sent both the hermit and the maid away into the forest to gather herbs.

Sir Lancelot rose from his bed, and Sir Bors helped him to put on his armor and to mount his horse. And so eager was the knight to feel that he was hale again that he put his lance in rest and spurred his horse, and so furiously did he ride across the mead, as if he rode at a knight, that of a sudden his wound broke out again, and he swooned and fell from his horse to the ground.

Sir Bors and Sir Lavaine made great sorrow and dole as they raised him and carried him back to the hermitage. It befell that Elaine, who had not gone far, heard their cries and came running swiftly, and seeing Sir Lancelot borne between

them pale as with death, she cried and wept and kneeled beside him, and put her arms about his neck and kissed him many times, and called to him to wake him.

'O traitors that ye are,' she cried to her brother and to Sir Bors, 'why have ye let him go from his bed? Oh, if ye have slain him I will denounce you for his murderers.'

Therewith came the holy hermit and was right wroth, and they put Sir Lancelot to bed again, and the hermit stanched the wound and gave the knight a cordial, so that he awoke out of his swoon.

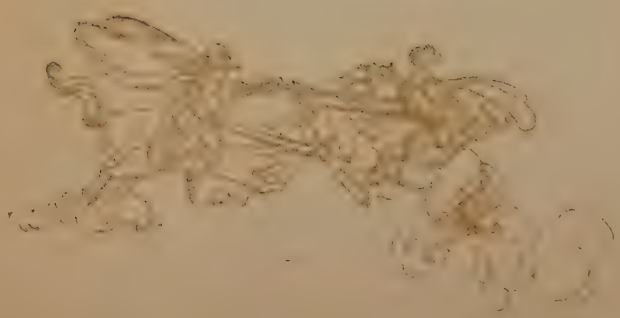
'Why have you put your life in jeopardy thus?' asked the hermit.

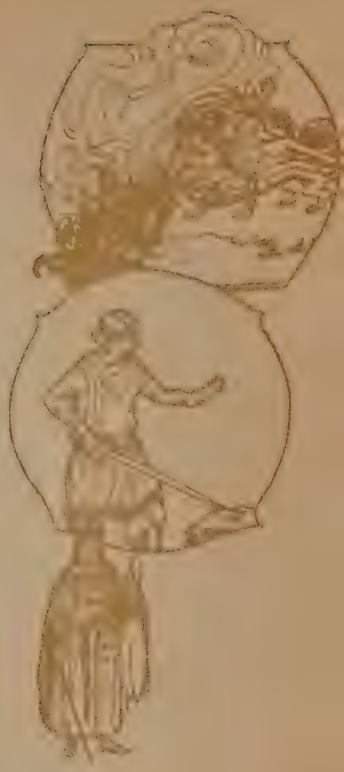
'For that I weary of being here,' said Sir Lancelot, 'and I would ride forth again.'

'Ah, Sir Lancelot,' said the hermit, 'your heart and your courage will never be done till your last day. But now ye must do as I command, and stay till I say ye are hale again.'

Soon after this Sir Bors departed, and the hermit promised that if he came back in a month, Sir Lancelot would be ready to depart with him. Thus Sir Lancelot stayed in the hermitage, and ever did the fair maid Elaine labor with diligence day and night to heal and comfort him, and to keep the time from wearying him. And never was child meeker to her parent, nor wife kinder to her husband, nor mother sweeter and more tender to her child, than Elaine was to Sir Lancelot.

The knight sorrowed that this was so; and he ever bore himself courteous, but not familiar in





speech, for it grieved him that he had no love in his heart for her, however deep might be her love for him.

When the month was over, Sir Bors returned and found Sir Lancelot walking about the forest, hale and strong again and eager to be riding.

In a day they all made them ready to depart from the hermit, and go to King Arthur's court, which was then in London. The Lily Maid went with them, sad that all her loving care was now ending, but glad to see the noble air with which Sir Lancelot bestrode his horse, and thankful that sometimes, as they rode upon their way, he turned to her smiling gravely, and spoke of the bright sunlight, the birds and trees they saw, and the company and travelers they passed.

Then they came to Astolat, and Sir Bernard gave them all great welcome, and they were well feasted and well lodged.

On the morrow, when they should depart, the maid Elaine was pale and very quiet, until Sir Lancelot came into the hall to say farewell. Then the maid, bringing her father and her two brothers with her, went up to Sir Lancelot and said:

'My lord, now I see that ye will depart. But oh, do thou have mercy upon me, for I must say that which damsels and gentlewomen are not used to say.'

Sir Lancelot with grave sad face looked at her and knew what she would say, and in very heaviness of spirit replied:

'Lady, it grieves me that I have unwittingly put such grief upon you.'

'O fair and gracious knight, suffer me not to die for love of you,' cried Elaine, and looked most piteously and wanly upon him. 'Oh, I would have none but you to be my husband.'

'Fair damsel,' replied Sir Lancelot, 'heavy is my grief to refuse you, but I have not turned my mind to marriage.'

'Alas,' said Elaine, and smiled sadly, 'then there is no more to be said.'

'Fair maid, I would that you will seek some knight more worthy of you,' said Sir Lancelot. 'When I am gone, do you set your heart upon some friend or kinsman; and for all the kindness ye have shown me, I will settle upon you a thousand pounds yearly.'

'Oh, of all this,' said the Lily Maid, 'I will have none; for if ye will not love me, wit ye well, Sir Lancelot, my happy days are done.'

'Say it not, fair maid,' said the knight, 'for many years and much love should be yours.'

But with a cry Elaine fell to the ground in a swoon, and her gentlewoman bore her into her chamber and sorrowed over her.

In great heaviness Sir Lancelot would depart, and went to his horse to mount it; and Sir Lavaine went with him.

'What would you do?' asked Sir Lancelot of him.

'What should I do,' said Sir Lavaine, 'but follow you, unless you drive me from you?'

'I cannot do that, so come with me,' said Sir Lancelot.

Then came Sir Bernard unto the knight and said, lifting his gray head and wrinkled and reverend face to Sir Lancelot as he bestrode his horse:

'Sir, I think my daughter Elaine will die for your sake. For ever was she quiet, but strong in mood and of a very fond heart.'

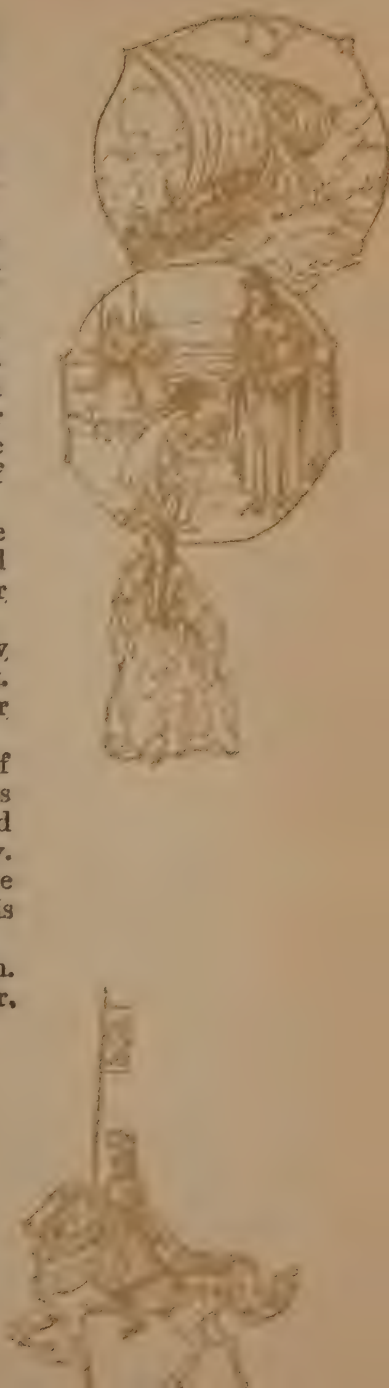
'It must not be,' said Sir Lancelot, 'but do thou cheer her, and when I am gone she will forget me. Never did I do or say aught but what a good knight should, and never made as if I cared for her. But I am right sorry for her distress, for she is full a fair maid, good and gentle, and sweet of voice and mood.'

'Father,' said Sir Lavaine, 'my sister Elaine doeth as I do. For since I first saw my lord Lancelot, I could never depart from him, nor never will I if I may follow him.'

Night and day did the fair maid Elaine sorrow in silence, so that she never slept, ate or drank. At the end of ten days her ghostly father bade her leave such grief and change her thoughts.

'Nay,' she said, 'I may not, and I would not if I could. And I do no sin to love the most peerless knight in all the world, the most gentle and courteous of men, and the greatest in all nobility. Therefore, as I know I may not live, do thou shrive me, good father, for I must needs pass out of this world.'

Then she confessed her sins and was shriven. And anon she called her father and her brother,



Sir Tirre, and begged that they would do as she desired as to her burial, and they promised.

In a little while she died, and a letter was put into her cold hand, and she was placed in a fair bed, with all the richest clothes she had about her. Then they carried her on the bed in a chariot, slowly, with many prayers and with much weeping, to the Thames, and there they put her and the bed in a barge.

Over all the bed and the barge, except her fair face, was placed a cloak of black samite, and an old and faithful servant of the house stepped into the barge to guide it.

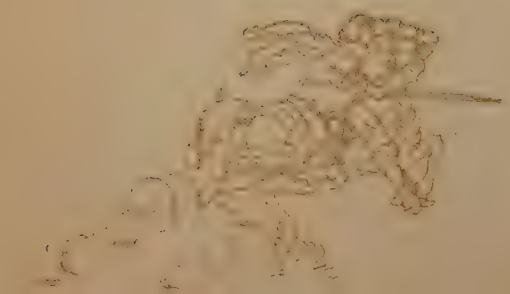
They let it go from them with great grief, and the aged man steered it down the river towards London, where was the court of Arthur.

It happened that, as the king and his queen were looking from a window of the palace which looked upon the Thames, they saw the black barge, and marveled what it might mean.

The king made the barge to be held fast, and took the queen's hand, and with many knights went down to the water's edge, and there they saw a fair gentlewoman lying on a rich bed, and she lay as if she slept.

The king took the letter gently from the fair hand which held it, and went into his court, and ordered all his knights to assemble, and then opened the letter and read what was written. The words were these:

'Most noble knight, my lord Sir Lancelot du Lake, now hath death come to me, seeing that you



would not give me your love. Yet do thou do this little thing I ask, now that I am dead, for I ask thee to pray for my soul and to bury me, and think of me sometimes. Pray for my soul and think of me, as thou art a knight peerless and most gentle.'

Sir Lancelot heard it word by word and went pale as ashes, so that men marveled to see his sorrow. When it was finished, he said:

'My lord, King Arthur, wit ye well that I am right heavy for the death of this fair damsel. God knoweth that I was never causer of her death by my will, as her brother Sir Lavaine here will avouch for me. She was both fair and good, and exceedingly kind to me when I was wounded; but she loved me out of all measure, and of that I was sore heavy.'

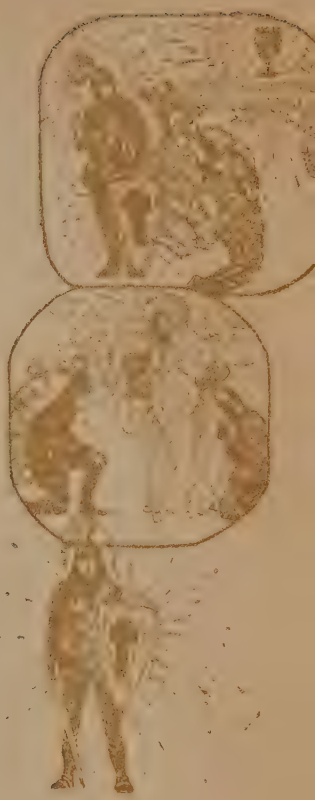
'Ye might have loved her,' said the queen, weeping for sorrow at the hapless fate of one so fair and fond.

'Madame,' said Lancelot, 'I could not be constrained to love her, but I sorrow for her death exceedingly.'

'Truth it is,' said the king, 'that love is free and never will be forced, for all the prayers that may be said to it. But thou wilt of thy worship bury this fair maid, Sir Lancelot?'

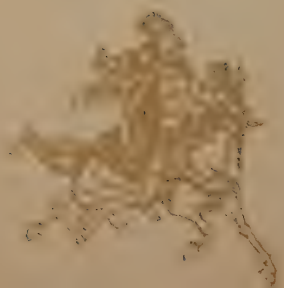
'That will I do,' said the knight, 'and in all richness and solemnity.'

Thus was it done, and all the knights of the Round Table sorrowfully followed the body of the fair Elaine to the grave.



On her tomb in letters of gold both thick and deep were set the words:

'Here lieth the body of Elaine, the Lily Maid of Astolat, who died of a passing great love.'



CHAPTER IV

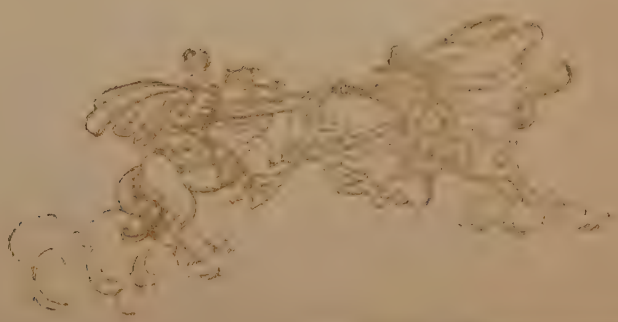
HOW THE THREE GOOD KNIGHTS ACHIEVED THE HOLY GRAAL

Now the time drew nigh which had been foretold by Merlin.

He had prophesied that, with the coming of King Arthur, the island of Britain should grow in strength and fame, and her knights should be more valiant and more pure than the knights of any other land.. But that, in a little while, they would become proud, and finding that none could withstand them, they would use their strength evilly.

To the court of King Arthur, as he sat in London, came tidings of how his barons warred with each other in remoter parts of his dominions, seizing the strong castles of each other, putting one another to death, and forsaking the ways of the Holy Church of Christ and turning to the idolatry of the old British pagans, some of whom still lurked and performed their evil rites in the desolate places of the forest and the hills.

The heart of the king was heavy as he sat thinking, and he wondered why this evil was entering into the hearts of his knights and barons. He re-



solved to take good counsel, and therefore commanded his clerk to come to him and bade him write down all his thoughts.

Then he gave the letter to a trusty knight named Sir Brewis, and bade him take it to the Archbishop of Britain, where he sat, an old and feeble man, in his great cathedral of St. Asaph, far on the verge of the western sea. He was the king's kinsman, and already known for his great sanctity as St. David. In a month the knight brought back the answer, which was in these words:

'The time draws nigh for the trial and testing of Britain. Three good knights shall come to you, and you must pray that their spirit shall spread like fire in the hearts of all your knights. You shall have all my prayers, dear kinsman, and I bid you say to all your knights, "Watch and pray."'

A few days later, when the king sat in the hall before the great fire, for it was passing cold and the wintry wind snarled at the windows, the great door was flung open, and into the hall came three men bearing a wounded knight in armor upon his shield. When they had set him down, the knights that were with the king knew him for Sir Kay the seneschal, and Sir Kay looked sourly about him, and bade those that carried him take him to his pallet and fetch a leech, and not stand gaping like fools.

'How now,' said Sir Gawaine, 'who hath tumbled thee, Sir Kay?'

'A fool whose head I will rase from his shoulders when I am hale again,' snapped Sir Kay, as he was borne away to his bed.

Then into the hall came a troll, and after the troll came a knight dressed all in white armor, who, going towards the king, knelt at his feet.

'Sir,' the knight said, 'I would that ye make me a knight.'

'Of what lineage have ye come?' asked the king.

'I am the only son left to my mother,' replied the knight, 'and she is the widow of Earl Evroc of the Wolds.'

'Ah,' said the king, and frowned, 'was he one of those turbulent lords of the north that now slay and war as if they were kin to the pagans, and threaten to bring ruin into my kingdom?'

'Nay, lord,' said the young knight, 'my father hath been dead these twenty years.'

'Then what is your name? What have ye done to deserve knighthood?' asked the king, who was angry at the hurt his old friend and foster-brother Kay had received.

'Sir, I am Perceval who slew the Dragon Knight, and I am not yet made a knight.'

All those that stood there cried out in joy, and King Arthur raised the knight from his knees and kissed him on both cheeks.

'Fair young warrior, I knew ye not,' said the king, 'and I repent me my churlish speech. We all have heard your great deeds, and much have I longed to see ye, and many reproaches gave I to Sir Kay, whose churlish manner thrust you from my hall.'

'Sir,' said Perceval, when he had clasped the hands of the knights, all of whom were eager to

know him, 'I vowed that I would not come to you until that I had avenged the blow which Sir Kay had given to my good friend Tod, who is my squire, and good fortune brought Sir Kay to me, or perhaps it was the will of Heaven. For as I came riding hitherwards this morning, I saw in the snow where a hawk had torn a thrush, and the blood lay on the whiteness of the ground. I stopped and gazed upon it, for I thought of the white life of Christ who gave His blood to save us all. Then I wondered whether the blood that He had shed upon the cruel Cross would ever be so pitiful a thing in men's minds that this dear Britain of ours would be rid of the evil which seems to be creeping into it, and in place thereof would turn as white as the sheets of snow that now lay over all the fields and ways. As I thought thus, I sank deeper and deeper in my thoughts. Suddenly I felt one strike me on the arm with the flat of his sword. I turned and saw a knight, who asked me why I gaped like a mooncalf at the torn bird. I told him it was my pleasure so to do. He asked if it was my pleasure to have to do with him, but I said I would liefer pursue my thoughts again. Nevertheless, he would not let me in quiet, and I drew my sword and beat him in my anger to the ground. When my squire unlaced his helm he knew him for Sir Kay, and told some passing men to bear him unto the court.'

'So have I punished him both for the insult to my friend and squire and to myself.'

Men marveled at the quiet speech and gentle

looks and manners of one whose fame for great deeds was in all men's mouths; and Sir Gawaine said:

'Of a truth, young chieftain, it had served Sir Kay rightly if ye had slain him, and he should thank thee for sparing him.'

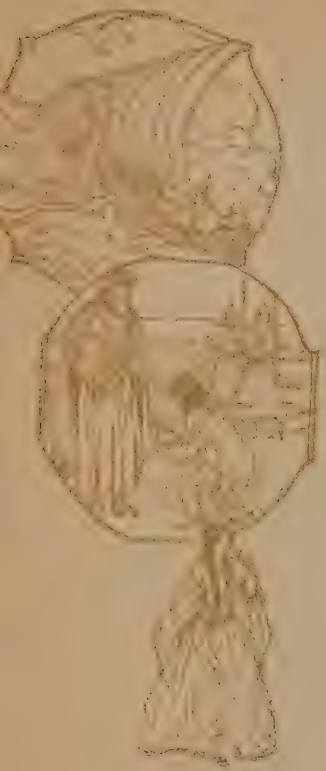
The other knights agreed that Sir Kay had done most unknightly in thus picking a quarrel with one who had not offended, and he had merited defeat.

Thereupon King Arthur knighted Perceval, and they made him great cheer and welcome; and the king knew in his heart that this was one of the three good knights whom St. David had spoken of, and he wondered who were the other two.

It chanced that seven nights before the good Sir Bors had fared forth from the court of Arthur to seek knightly adventures. And his spirit was joyful as he rode, for he felt that some great adventure was to come to him, howbeit he knew not why he felt this was to be.

Northward he fared through the land, and the snow had not yet fallen, but so mild was the season that men's thoughts had stirred towards spring. For many days he journeyed and the ways were more lonely, the country more desolate, the rocky hills more bare. He wondered why it was that the land seemed so forsaken, as if the folk had long since left the fields to become solitary wastes.

At length it befell that one evening he could find no place wherein to shelter for the night; there was no hermit's cell nor castle nor knight's hold



through all the way by which he had come that day. Towards twilight he came upon a wide moor, and the cold moon peered at him over the distant mountains. Far in the midst of the waste he saw a great pile, as of a castle, and pricked his horse towards it.

It was indeed a castle, but its walls were broken and mossy, as if long years had passed since it housed fire and gay company. He rode over the drawbridge into the great courtyard, and the echo of his horse's hoofbeats was the only sound that greeted him.

He sought the upper chambers, and found in one a rough bed of fern leaves, and, having supped from the scrip he carried with him, he composed himself to sleep, glad that at least a roof and thick walls shielded him from the freezing cold which now swept over the land.

Forthwith he slept; but at midnight he awoke and found it was deeply dark, and looking to the arrow slit in the wall he sought some friendly star. As he looked, a great red light burst through, and with that there came, thrusting fiercely, a great spear like a long flame, which darted at him, and then stayed just before him. The point of it burned blue and dazzling.

As he lay marveling, the spear went back a space; then he grasped his sword that lay beside him, but before he could defend himself the flaming spear dashed forward again and smote him in the shoulder.

Then the spear went back and the chamber was

deep dark again, and for very pain Sir Bors lay and groaned. Nor could he sleep more that night. When it was dawn he arose, thinking to ride forth, but when he went down into the courtyard to saddle his horse in the stable, he marveled to see that where there had been an open ruined gateway the night before, was now a great black oaken door, spiked and bolted.

For a long time he essayed by every means to get himself out of that castle, but he could not find a way. Yet never did he hear or see aught that showed that any one lived there. Many times he went throughout the place, but never found aught but ruin and emptiness, and the dust and darkness of long neglect everywhere.

When three days had gone, Sir Bors was faint with the pain of his wound and the hunger with which he suffered. Then, as he sat beside his horse in its stall, he suddenly heard the clank of armor, and going forth into the courtyard saw a knight all armed, with his shield on his shoulder and his sword naked in his hand.

Without a word the stranger darted at him, and hardly did Sir Bors have time to dress his shield; and then they lashed mightily at each other, and thrust and hewed sorely. Thus for half the day they fought, and so fiercely that soon Sir Bors had many wounds, so that blood oozed from the joints of his armor. But the other knight seemed to be unharmed, and never seemed to breathe heavily. Then Sir Bors became extremely wroth, and beat so fiercely upon the other that he pressed him al-

ways backward until the stranger was nigh to the door of a chamber which opened into the courtyard; and suddenly he dashed backwards into the chamber and shut the door.

As he sat beside his horse in its stall, he suddenly heard the clank of armor.

Nor would he come forth, for all that Sir Bors called him coward and recreant. Nor would he answer one word, nor had he said one word since Sir Bors had seen him.

After some time Sir Bors resolved to go back

and rest himself beside his horse, for his great wounds burned him sorely; but as he turned, suddenly, without a sound, the stranger knight dashed forth, and struck a felon blow at the good knight's neck. But Sir Bors was aware of him in time and defended himself full well.

So fiercely did Sir Bors lay on that soon the other was beaten to his knees, and then the good knight rushed at him to hurl him headlong and to slay him. Suddenly the other knight seemed to fall together as if dead; but the armor sounded hollow as it fell, and Sir Bors marveled.

Swiftly he hacked the fastenings of the helm and tore it from the neck armor. Then a great fear seized and shook him. The armor was empty!

He knew then that he had fought with a demon. He crossed himself and prayed, and weak with deadly fear and his wounds, he went into the stall and sat beside his horse, and marveled how he could win with life from the fell power that seemed to hold him prisoner.

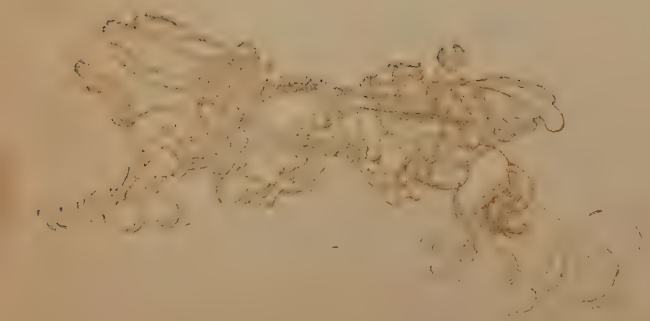
Suddenly, from a dark cavernous hole in the dungeons, came a great boar, with curving tusks keen as sword-blades, and rushed at Sir Bors full fiercely. Hardly did the knight defend himself from the strength and the fierce rushes of the great beast. The boar with long tusks tore the shield from the grasp of Sir Bors, and slashed his shield arm sorely, and then Sir Bors was wroth, and with a very fierce blow he smote off the boar's head. Immediately thereupon, with the pain of many wounds and the weakness of his famine, Sir Bors fainted,

and lay upon the frozen snow as one dead. For long he stayed thus ere he revived, and then he rose and dragged himself into the stall where lay his

The armor was empty!

horse, half dead with hunger, before an empty manger.

All that night Sir Bors lay in a sad pass, for he thought that now he would never see dawn again



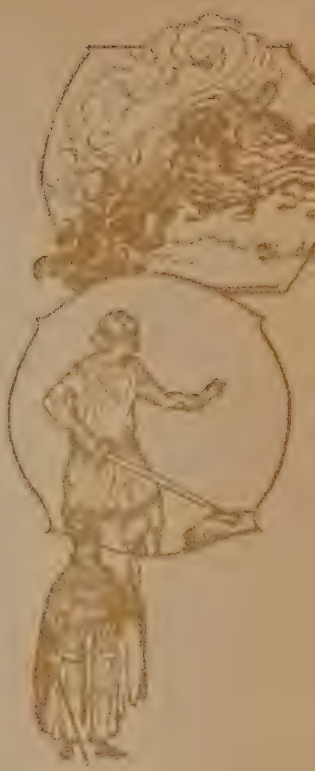
in life. He prayed and commended his soul to God, and confessed his sins and prepared himself for death as behoved a good knight; and thereafter he slept sweetly.

At dawn he awoke, exceedingly hungry, and looking forth into the court he had it in his mind to carve meat from the dead boar. But he was astounded beyond measure to find that it was not there. In its place was a great trencher of steaming hot collops of meat, and toasted bread, with hot milk in great plenty.

Sir Bors ran towards the food, and so ravenous was his hunger that he would have devoured it instantly. But he bethought him before he had placed any of it to his lips, and dropping it he crossed himself and ran back into the stall and tried not to look forth. He knew that the food was placed there by some fell fiend or demon to tempt him, and if he ate that unholy food, his soul would be for ever lost.

Anon sweet voices sounded in the courtyard as if to attract him forth, and the smell of the hot food was wafted strongly into the stable. The fiends themselves could not enter, for there was a horseshoe hung in the proper way upon the lintel of the door, and, moreover, Sir Bors had stuck his sword-point in the ground, and the holy sign of the cross prevented the evil things from crossing the threshold.

All that day did Sir Bors lie half dying, while the fiends tempted him, but the knight was too strong and manful of soul to yield, and would liefer



die than become the slave of the powers of the Netherworld.

Then in the twilight he commended his soul to God, for he felt near to death. When he had finished his prayer, he heard great and horrible cries in the court as of rage and disappointment. Then came an old man at the door of the stable, white of hair and very reverend; and he came and put his hand upon Sir Bors' head and spoke mildly and said:

'Good and faithful knight, sorely tried have ye been, and now you shall have no more adventures here. Full worshipfully have ye done and better shall ye do hereafter. And now your wounds shall be healed and ye shall have good cheer until to-morrow.'

Therewith there was all manner of sweetness and savor in the place, and Sir Bors saw as in a mist a shining vessel borne by a wondrous maiden. He knew that this was the Holy Graal; and he bowed his head, and forthwith he was whole of his wounds.

On the morrow he departed after a night's sweet sleep, and rode to Arthur's court and told of his adventures.

The king and queen and all the fellowship of the Round Table were passing glad to see Sir Bors whole and well, and they made much of him, for they felt that he would do things of great renown.

Then at the feast of Pentecost went all the court to the minister to hear their service; and when they returned to the palace the king ordered that dinner should be prepared in the hall of the Round Table,

for this was one of the days when he was wont to assemble all his knights at a great feast of knighthood.

While they waited for the horn to sound, warning them that the meal was ready, one came running to the king, saying that a thing of marvel had

A shining vessel borne by a wondrous maiden.

happened. And Arthur went to the hall of the Round Table with his knights, and there in the seats about the great circular board they found letters of gold written, which said, 'Here should sit Sir Bedevere,' or 'Here should sit Sir Gawaine,' and thus was the name of a knight written in every seat.

In the Siege, or Seat, Perilous, where twice or thrice a reckless knight had dared to sit, but only to be struck dead by a sudden flashing blow of mystery, there were written the words, 'In the four hundredth and fourth and fiftieth year after the passion of our Lord, shall he that shall fill this seat come among ye.'

All the knights marveled and looked each at the other.

'It seemeth me,' said Lancelot, 'that this is the very day on which this seat shall be filled by him for whom it is appointed, for this is the four hundred and fifty-fourth winter since Christ died on the rood.'

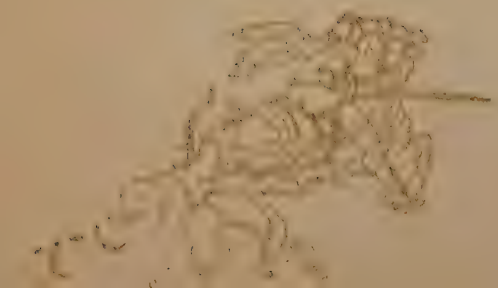
It was seen that on each side of the Siege Perilous was written, on the right one, the name of Sir Perceval, and on the left one, the name of Sir Bors.

Then the horn was sounded to dinner, and each knight took the seat appointed for him, and young knights served them. All sieges round the table were filled except the Siege Perilous.

Men ate and drank soberly, for they felt that an adventure strange and marvelous should happen that day, and so indeed it befell.

For when they had eaten, and the priest was saying in a great silence the grace after meat, suddenly a shrill wind sounded without, and all the doors and windows shut fast. Men looked at each other in the twilight thus caused, and many a face was white with fear.

Then the door opened and an old and reverend man entered, white of beard and head, and clothed



also in white; and Sir Bors knew him for the same who had come to him at the Castle of Fiends. By the right hand the ancient man brought a young knight, clad in red armor, with a sword at his side, but with no shield.

'Peace be with you, fair lords,' said the old man. Then turning to the king he said:

'Sir, I bring here a young knight, the which is of king's lineage, whereby the marvels of this court shall be accomplished, and the trial of this thy kingdom shall be brought to a happy end, if that may be. And the name of him is Galahad.'

'Sir,' said the king, 'ye be right welcome and the young knight with you.'

The old man made the young knight unarm him, and he was in a coat of red sendal, and bare a mantle that was furred with ermine. Then was the young man led by the reverend man to the Siege Perilous, and sat him thereon, and men marveled to see that the death-stroke did not flash like lightning and slay him.

'Sir,' said the old man to him, 'wit ye well that that is your seat. For you are he that shall surely achieve the Holy Graal, and such of these your fellows as are pure in heart and humble shall achieve it with you.'

'Sir,' said the king, 'if it may be that ye know, will ye tell us what my knights must do to achieve the Holy Vessel, and thus bring peace into my kingdom in place of war? For many of those that are kings and barons under me are warring with each other, and threaten to rend this island of

Britain, and some are forsaking Christ and are turning to the evil faith and cruel worship of the pagan gods of Britain. And it goeth to my heart to know this and I have much dread.'

'Sir king,' said the old white man, 'none may tell you what shall be the end of this quest of the Holy Graal, but I can tell you and these your knights what they must do to save this land from the ruin which doth threaten it. Ye know that the Holy Vessel was that wherein Christ ate the lamb on the Thursday before he was hung upon the Cross. And Joseph of Arimathea did bring it here to Britain, and here hath it been for more than four hundred and fifty winters. And while ye and your kingdom did love Christ and did do His word, the Sangreal stayed within your borders. But now ye war with each other, and are evil livers and full of pride and mastery, and if ye do not repent and stay your dishonor, then shall the Holy Vessel pass from Britain, and ruin and death and civil war shall stalk through the land and leave it desolate.'

Having spoken thus, the old man went from the hall, and none stayed him; for too many there were who knew that they had been the evil livers at whom his words had pointed.

Then uprose Sir Gawaine, who was a faithful knight and true man to his king, though a proud one and a hasty. He was filled with sorrow for the ruin that threatened his fair land.

'Now I do here avow,' he said, 'that to-morrow, without fail, I shall set forth, and I shall labor with all the strength of my body and my soul to

go in quest of the Holy Graal, so that if I be fit to see it and to bring it hither, this dear land may be saved from woe.'

So hot were his words that many of the better knights rose also, and raising their right hands did make a like avowal; and those that cared not for the quest felt that they must seem to do as the others did, and so made avowal also, though in their hearts they thought more of pride and earthly power.

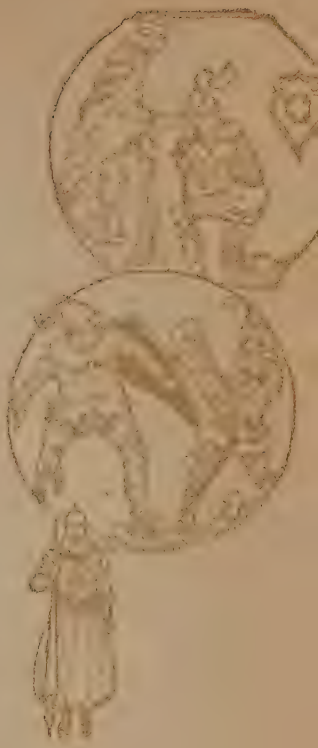
'Gawaine, Gawaine,' cried the king, and the great tears stood in his eyes, 'I know ye do right to avow this and to cause these others to avow also; but a great dread is upon me, for I have great doubt that this my fellowship shall never meet again.'

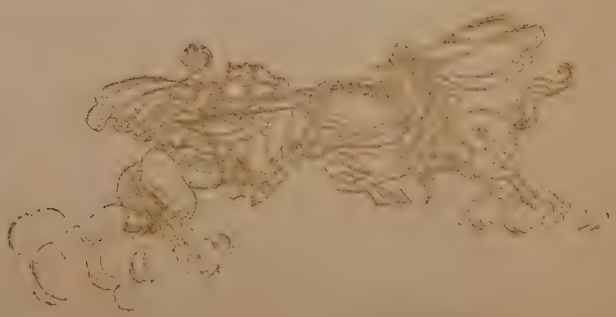
'Fear not,' said Lancelot, 'for bethink ye, my lord, in no better adventure can we find death than in this quest, and of death we are all sure.'

On the morrow the knights armed themselves, and bade farewell to King Arthur and his queen, and there was much weeping and great sorrow. And as the knights rode through the streets of Camelot the crowds stood and wept, both rich and poor. All were full of dread to see so many brave knights depart that never more would return.

Having passed through the gates of the town, every knight took the way that he liked best.

Now Sir Galahad was without a shield, and he rode four days without adventure. At evensong on the fourth day he came to an abbey of white monks, and there was given great cheer. He found two other knights of the Round Table at that abbey,





the one King Bagdemagus and the other Sir Ulfin; and the three had supper together, and made great cheer one of the other, and spoke of the adventures each would desire to have.

'There is within this abbey, as men tell me, a shield,' said King Bagdemagus, 'which no man may bear about his neck, but he is injured or slain within three days. Yet to-morrow I will adventure to win it.'

In the morning, therefore, after they had heard mass, King Bagdemagus asked the abbot to show him where was the shield. Then was he led to the high altar in the church, and behind it was hung a shield which glowed with shining whiteness, and in the middle thereof was a red cross which seemed to quiver as if it were living.

'Sir,' said the abbot, 'this shield ought not to hang about the knight's neck unless he be one of the three best knights of the world, and I council you to beware.'

'No matter,' said King Bagdemagus, 'I will essay it, for though I am not Sir Lancelot, yet I am a good knight enough.'

This he said in his pride, and took the shield and put the strap about his neck, and bade good-by to the other twain, and so went forth with his squire.

They had not ridden but two miles or more, when at the opening to a wood Sir Bagdemagus saw a knight in white armor on a horse, riding up and down as if to do battle with any that should venture to go into the forest drive.

When the white knight saw him he called out:

'Who art thou? Thou barest the shield of a knight peerless, but not the armor.'

'Who am I?' replied King Bagdemagus scornfully. 'I am he that shall give a good account of myself with thee.'

With that he leveled his lance and ran furiously upon the knight. But the other stood still, and when the spear-head was nigh his shield, he lightly turned it aside, and as Sir Bagdemagus swept by, the knight, with a quick fierce stroke of his sword, smote him so hard that the blade bit through the mail even to the shoulder-bone; whereby Sir Bagdemagus fell to the ground in a swoon.

The white knight called the squire to him and said:

'Bear ye this shield to the young knight, Sir Galahad, who is at the white abbey. Greet him from me, and say that it is for him to wear this shield, and none other. And tell him that I shall meet him erelong, if God wills, and that we shall fare together to that which is appointed for us.'

The squire did as he was bidden, and told Sir Galahad of the white knight's words. Sir Galahad asked him what was the device upon the shield of the white knight, and he answered, 'A red cross.' Then said the young knight, 'It shall be even as he saith.'

Sir Galahad mounted his horse and rode alone, ever northward, for he knew that the Holy Graal was hidden in a castle somewhere in the north among the warring barons. Many days he rode without adventure, until on a day he came to an

old venerable wood, dark and thick and close, where the moss hung like thick beards from the hoary branches.

There, in a laund or glade in the midmost part of the forest, he found an old and white dame, kneeling before a green cross beside the path, weeping piteously as she prayed and beat her breast.

'What ails ye, lady?' asked Sir Galahad.

'Ah, good knight,' said the old dame, and as she rose it was well seen she was of gentle birth, 'I weep for that I have lived to see the day when sons of mine shall slay each the other. I have three sons, and all are of the worshipful company of the Round Table. But two are wasteful livers, and have taken from me all that whereby I lived; and ever hath my youngest boy, Sir Hewlin, withstood their evil ways. Wherefore they hated him. And yesterday did Sir Nulloth and Sir Dew, my elder sons, return, and did quarrel with my dear lad Hewlin. And now I fear they go about to slay him. Oh, if that they kill him, who is the prop and comfort of my old age, I shall surely die.'

'Sad it is, lady,' said Sir Galahad, and mournful was his mind, 'to think that in this dear land of Britain there should be knights that are given to such thoughts of evil as to slay their own kin. Lead me to them, I pray ye.'

He set the dame upon his saddle before him, and she led the way through the forest. When they had gone but a mile she started, and stopped the horse, and they heard the sound of clashing steel. Sadly did that poor lady shriek and cry:

'Ah! they slay him now! My dear son! My dear boy!'

Swiftly Sir Galahad made his horse to leap forward, and in a little while they came upon a great meadow, where two knights on foot were together fighting another single knight with swords. Forthwith Sir Galahad cried with a loud and stern voice, 'Hold, put up your swords, ye evil brothers, that would slay each other!'

All turned at the cry. Then, seeing his mother, the young knight Sir Hewlin threw down his sword. And leaping from Sir Galahad's horse the reverend lady tottered to her youngest son and threw herself upon his breast, and he clasped his mother in his arms.

But the two evil brothers laughed scornfully at Sir Galahad.

'Who art thou, thou knight in red?' they cried. 'Thinkest thou to frighten us with thy big words?'

Quickly they mounted their horses and ran upon Sir Galahad together. But the lance of one he received upon his shield, and the weapon snapped in twain; and that of the other he thrust aside and, as the knight thundered by, he brought down his sword with so fierce and wrathful a stroke that the head of the knight flew from his shoulders.

Seeing this, the other, who was Sir Nulloth, made haste to throw himself from his horse, and came and kneeled before Sir Galahad, praying mercy.

'I know who ye are,' he said. 'Ye are Sir Galahad, the stainless knight, who shall prevail in

all thy deeds, and whom no weapon may wound until ye have fulfilled your destiny. And I will do faithfully any behest ye may lay upon me.'

'I will then,' said Sir Galahad sternly, 'that thou makest peace with thy mother and thy brother here instantly; that thou seekest naught of them till thy

She threw herself upon his breast, and he clasped his mother in his arms.

dying day, which shall not be far from thee; and that thou goest this day and place thyself in the service of Sir Bedevere, or Sir Uriens upon the coasts, and help to thrust forth the hateful pagan from the land.'

The knight swore to do all this, and after he had

made his peace with his kindred, he set forth to do Sir Galahad's bidding. And it was as the stainless knight had foretold, for in seven days Sir Nulloth had found death, bravely fighting the pagan pirates.

Sir Galahad went forward, sore of heart to think that such evil was in the land and in men's minds, that they could be found to wish the death of a brother and to care naught for the sorrow of an old mother.

Thus for many months Sir Galahad rode about the land, seeking out the knights who, with their bands of soldiers, fought to wrest from each other land and castles. And ever he strove to make peace between them, and to show them how, while they fought with each other, Christian against Christian, the pagan hordes were let unhindered into the land, ravening, burning, and slaying.

Some of the battling knights did forsake their evil ways, and went to Sir Bedevere and Sir Uriens, with whom they strove to push back the fierce pagans into their long black ships. But many others, so lost to honor and knightliness were they, performed not their promises, and continued to fight each with the other.

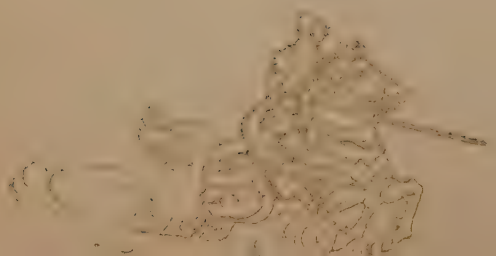
So fierce, indeed, was the fighting through all that land, that the peasants forsook the fields and hid themselves; and the pagans from the northern wilderness came over the walls and wandered, killing and burning and robbing. And thus in many parts the crops were not sown or reaped, the wheat stood unharvested and wild, and the grass and

weeds grew tall on the very hearths of the poor peasants and husbandmen.

The heart of Sir Galahad grew sick, seeing the

Sir Galahad began to arm himself full hastily to meet them.

evil which was come into the land, and he feared that soon the Holy Graal would be taken from the island of Britain, and that then ruin would stalk throughout the length and breadth of the realm.



Once, at the dawning, Sir Galahad looked from the door of a little hermitage where he had passed the night, and was aware of a great company of men coming over the moor. They were all horsed, and were going towards the sea, which was on the right hand, where steep and fearful cliffs fell sheer to the thundering surf beneath. And in their midst he saw that they held captive a full noble knight, who seemed wounded, and whose armor was all broken and cracked, as if he had fought valiantly before he had been overcome. Him they were going to hurl headlong down the cliffs.

Sir Galahad began to arm himself full hastily to meet them. But as he dressed his armor he was aware of a knight coming swiftly from a little wood that lay towards the sea-edge. Then was the heart of Sir Galahad exceeding joyful when he saw that the knight was all in white armor, and that on his shield was the device of a heart; for he knew that this was Sir Perceval.

Sir Perceval spurred towards the band of knights, and in a loud voice called on them to release their captive.

'Who art thou?' they cried.

'I am a knight of the Pendragon of these islands, King Arthur,' answered Perceval, 'and thy captive is my friend, Sir Bors of Brittany.'

'Ha! ha!' the others laughed, and spurred furiously towards him. 'Slay him!' they shouted. 'We own no Arthur here. We are our own lords.'

With spears in rest, seven of the knights thundered against Sir Perceval. But by this time Sir

Galahad was upon his horse, and, making no outcry, he spurred upon the others.

Three knights he dashed to the ground with one lance-thrust; but then the spear broke. Therewith he drew his sword, and smote in the thick of them so furiously on the left and on the right that they could not abide him, but fled from about Sir Bors, who, wresting a sword from one of them, rode after the seven that were fighting Sir Perceval.

So valiantly and hardily did the three knights lay about them that in a little while their enemies had fled, leaving more than half their number slain.

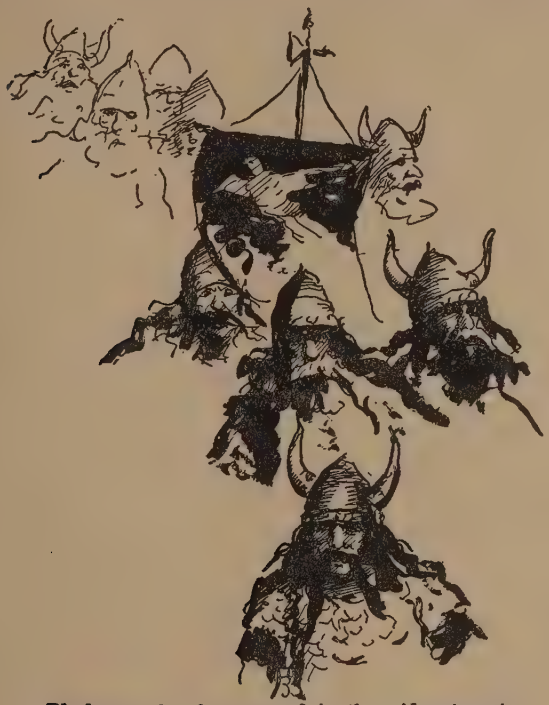
Then did the three knights make great cheer and welcome of each other, and told each their adventures, and promised that now they were together they would never more part till death should summon them.

So, together, they fared thereafter many months, doing noble deeds, and seeking earnestly to bring men's hearts to turn to friendship and union, so that, united, the lords of the northern lands should turn upon the pagans and destroy them utterly.

It befell that, on a morn, they came to a castle on a great cliff that was in the marches of Scotland; and they heard a horn sound in that castle and much shouting. On the walls thereof were men of a savage aspect, peering and looking down at them. And those men had fair hair, with steel helms which had great horns or wings upon them. On their tall bodies were leather jerkins, with gold chains and many ornaments.

Then Sir Galahad and his friends were aware

that on the topmost pinnacle of the castle was a banner, floating and flapping in the morning wind. Black was that banner, and in the midmost part



Black was that banner, and in the midmost part thereof was a golden raven.

thereof was a golden raven, with beak open as if it croaked, and its wings were wide thrown, as if it flew over a field of slain men.

They knew that this was a horde of pagans who had wrested this castle from its rightful lord, and that full fierce would be the battle.

Then from a hole or cave beneath a tree nearby came a maiden, richly dressed, but sad and pitiable of face and thin of form, as if from long pining.

'Fair lords,' said she, 'for God and His love turn again if ye may, or else here ye will come unto your death.'

'Nay,' said Sir Galahad, 'we will not turn again, for He shall help us in whose service we be entered in. Who are ye, fair damsel, in such painful guise?'

'Fair lords, I am Issyllt,' said the maiden, and the tears filled her eyes. 'My father is Earl Hernox, the lord of this castle. And whether he be dead by torture at the hands of his hateful enemies and these fiends, or whether he be still alive against a time when they have more leisure to torture him, I know not. But three nights ago came certain knights with a horde of these evil pagans, and stormed the castle, and for all my dear father's valiant deeds, and the prowess of my three dear brothers, they overcame our people, and my three brothers I saw slain before my eyes. When they rushed upon my father, my nurse dragged me away, and we fled hither. But I cannot go away, not knowing whether my father is dead. And if he be dead I care not whether the pagan fiends catch and slay me.'

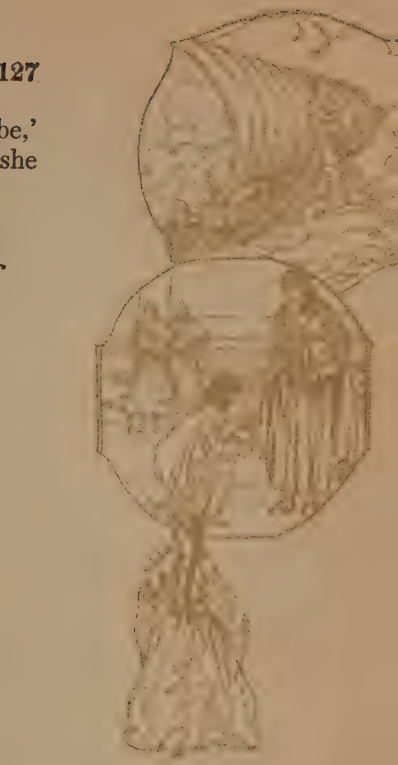
'Fair maiden,' said Sir Galahad, 'be of good heart, for your father may yet be delivered.'

'Ha, fair lord, I know not how that may be,' said the maiden. Then, glancing at the castle, she

"Now God be with ye, fair lords!"

saw the portcullis yawn, and some ten knights rush forth, with pagans besides on foot. Whereat she clasped her hands in terror.

'Now God be with ye, fair lords,' she cried. 'You have my prayers, and may Heaven grant ye



victory. But dread is on me for your deaths, brave knights.'

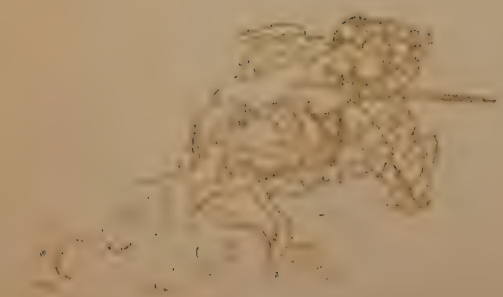
Full wrathful were the three good knights to hear the girl's sad tale, and hard was their rage to hear that Christian knights had leagued themselves with the heathen Saxons so as to get their aid in a private quarrel with the Earl Hernox. Therefore very joyously did Galahad and Perceval leap forward, lances in rest, against the traitorous knights that rushed towards them from the castle.

Marvelous indeed was it to see the deeds of those three stainless knights that day; for when their lances were broken, they drew their swords, and their wrath, their fierceness and their valor none could withstand.

While Sir Bors smote with deadly blows the pagans that swarmed about him, Sir Galahad and Sir Perceval dealt death among the traitorous knights, so that not one was left alive. And seeing this, the fair-haired fierce pagans lost heart. Turning, they wished to flee into the castle and pull down the portcullis.

But swiftly on their heels dashed the three brave knights, and the pagans, never stopping, heard the hoofs of their horses thunder over the drawbridge close behind them. The horde of Saxons took flight into the hall, and there they stood and got breath. But the knights, leaping from their horses, rushed in on foot, and back to back they met the onslaught of the yelling heathens.

Very fierce was the anger in the hearts of the three knights, so that they stayed not their hands



even when the pirates gave way and fled from the dreadful place of slaughter. But the knights pursued them wheresoever they tried to hide, and hither and thither about the castle they ran, and in and out the chambers, up and down the stairs, until for very weariness they had perforce to cease.

Then when they beheld the great multitude of pagans they had slain, they were sobered and sad, thinking themselves great sinners.

'Certes,' said Sir Bors, 'I ween that God willed that we should slay so many, for they must have done great evil.'

'They are indeed foul pagans,' said Sir Galahad, 'and have done great wrong and cruelty in their time to women and children through this fair land of Britain. But I doubt we have been mad this little while to slay so many mothers' sons as these.'

Then from out of a secret chamber came a priest, white with great age, and with a countenance that shone marvelously bright; and when he saw how many were slain in that hall, he was abashed. Sir Galahad put off his helm, and the two knights with him, and all three kneeled down and confessed the madness of their sin which had slain even those that craved for quarter.

'Ye have done more than ye wist, brave knights,' said the priest, when he had absolved them; 'for the evil knights that led these pagan thieves had plotted to gain this castle because of the great and holy treasures that are hidden here. And by a prophecy I know that ye are the three good knights, peerless among all, who should achieve this deed.

Therefore, when ye have ordered these slain to be removed, and when the hall shall be garnished and your harness shall be cleaned of the signs of battle, ye shall see that which hath been ordained for ye.'

When all had been done as they had commanded, and the place well cleansed and fresh rushes laid along the floor, the three knights sat on a bench, and the Earl Hernox and the maid Issyllt with them, and there was much cheer and rejoicing between them all.

Then the old priest called the earl and his daughter from the room, and left the three knights together. Suddenly, as they sat talking, the doors were shut and the windows were darkened, and a great wind arose with a sad sound, wailing and piping. Then the darkness suddenly went away, and they saw a great light shining in the midmost part of the hall, so bright and strong that hardly could their eyes suffer it. Soon through the light they could see a table of silver, whereon was a wide dish also of silver, marvelously and delicately wrought.

Then the doors opened and they saw angels entering; and two bare candles of wax, and the third held a towel, and in the hand of the fourth was a spear which bled marvelously from the point thereof. Going to the table the angels set the candles and the towel upon it, and the spear was placed beside the shining vessel.

Of a sudden the knights were aware that there sat one beside the table who was marvelously old and white; and he was dressed in the habit of a

bishop, and his face was very winning, and a great brightness flowed from it.

On the breast of his robe were words in the Latin tongue, which said, 'Lo, I am Joseph, the first bishop of Christendom, who did take our Lord's body down from the cruel rood.'

The three marveled greatly, for that bishop had been dead more than four hundred years. Seeing their looks of perplexity, the bishop smiled sweetly upon them, and said: 'Marvel not, O knights, for though I am now a spirit, I know thy weakness, and have come to aid thee.'

Then the bishop took up the shining vessel from the table, and came to Galahad; and the knight kneeled down and took of the food that was within the holy dish. After that the other two received it. Of marvelous savor was the food, and like none that they had ever eaten or thought of at any time before.

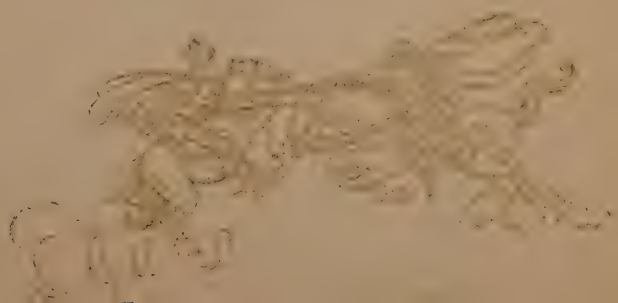
Then the bishop said to Galahad: 'Son, knowest thou what is this vessel I hold in my hands?'

'Nay, holy man, I know not,' replied Galahad.

'It is the holy vessel which men call the Sangreal, out of which our Lord ate the lamb at the feast before He was betrayed to that death upon the rood whereby He redeemed the world, if men would but choose His gentle law.'

'It is what we have most desired to see, holy father,' said Sir Galahad.

'And it is what, alas, no others in this realm shall ever see,' said the bishop; and his countenance, which before had been sweet and gentle, now



saddened and was dark. 'For this night it shall depart from this land of Lorgis, so that it shall never more be seen here.'

'Alas,' cried Galahad and Perceval, 'that is great sorrow to hear. O holy bishop and spirit, say not that it means that this land shall be rent in ruin and given up to heathendom again?'

'It must be so,' said the bishop sadly. 'Christ is not served in gentleness, nor is His law worshiped in this land, where men slay their brothers, rob their kindred, and make treaties with the pagans. And its knights are turned to evil livers, desiring mastery and proud power. Therefore hath Christ sent me to disinherit this land of this holy thing with which He hath honored it since that time when I brought it here four hundred and fifty-five winters ago.'

Hearing these words of doom, Sir Galahad and Sir Perceval wept full piteously for the fate of their country. When they had mourned greatly they asked if there was no hope of turning the land from its evil ways.

'There is none,' said the bishop sorrowfully. 'Have ye three not tried manfully these last two years since ye have sought that which ye now see? And all thy labors, thy battlings, thy griefs, have they availed aught? No, it is the will of God that in due time this land and this people shall be put into the melting-pot. And when the season appointed shall come, sorrow and death, rebellion and treachery shall stalk through the land, and naught shall stand of its present kingdoms; the

pagans shall blot out the holy memory of God and Christ, and shall turn the fanes of prayer into the lairs of wolves, and owls shall rest where hymns of praise have been sung. And no wars of goodly knights may hinder these things of dreadful doom. But I have this message for ye two, Galahad and Perceval; that inasmuch as ye have seen this which you craved to see, and have lived purely and unspotted from pride or evil, thy souls shall go with me when I shall depart. But you, my son,' he said, looking at Sir Bors, 'still find in your heart the love of kin, and longing for battle, and so you shall remain, to fight for Christ while yet you are alive.'

Suddenly a fierce light came where they sat, so that Sir Bors kneeled as one blinded for a time. When it had passed, he looked and saw where Sir Galahad and Sir Perceval still kneeled, with their hands lifted as if in prayer. But there was naught to see of the holy vessel or the spear, nor was Joseph there.

Then, going to the knights, he found that they were dead.

Sir Bors knew then their souls had gone with Joseph and the holy vessel, and had been borne to the heaven for which their pure and humble hearts had yearned while yet they lived.

Then Sir Bors made great sorrow for his two fellows, and knew that never more would he be as joyful or as careless as he had been. With right heavy mood he craved of Earl Hernox to have a grave dug deep in the living rock whereon the castle was builded. This the earl gladly did,

and very solemnly the two good knights were buried, and long did Sir Bors mourn over the grave.

In a little while thereafter Sir Bors armed himself, and departed, and after many adventures rode southwards till he came to Camelot. And there he told the king and such knights as there were, how the two stainless knights had achieved the Holy Graal, and how their souls had been taken up with the sacred vessel.

All the court mourned for the two knights, and the king commanded a history to be written of what Sir Bors had told. It was so done, and the book, richly adorned with many colored letters, was kept in the great treasure-chest in the castle of Sarum.

Ever after Sir Bors was a silent man, for he could not forget the holy and terrible sight he had seen. Of the doom which was coming in due time upon the dear and fair land of Britain, as was prophesied by St. Joseph, he told no man, but kept the words fast locked in his heart.

CHAPTER V

OF THE PLOTS OF SIR MORDRED; AND HOW SIR LANCELOT SAVED THE QUEEN

After the quest of the Sangreal was completed, and all the knights that were left alive had returned to the court of King Arthur, there was great joy among the people, and the king and Queen Gwenevere were passing glad of the remnant that had come home again.

Especially did the queen make much of Sir Lancelot and of Sir Bors his cousin, for they were the two most noble and courteous knights of the Round Table, and none thought of them but as men peerless and beyond compare.

Sir Mordred, who was the king's nephew, was jealous of the two knights, and went about privily among such knights as were his familiars, and spoke sneering words concerning Sir Lancelot and the queen and Sir Bors. Once Sir Mordred said such words in the hearing of his brother Sir Gawaine; but that knight so heavily and wrathfully took him to task, that Sir Mordred knew that Sir Gawaine envied not the two knights, and could never be brought to think other than friendly thoughts of them.

Therefore Sir Mordred hated the two knights

more than ever. Of a slight frame was Mordred, but tall, with dark hair, sallow face, and deep-set gray eyes beside a thin long nose. Few loved him, for he was never cheery nor very friendly, and ever seemed to sneer with his thin lips and his cold wolfish eyes.

In a little while strange dark rumors began to go about the court, and it was whispered that so proud had Sir Lancelot become of his fame and prowess, that he harbored evil thoughts against the king, and that he aimed to make a kingdom for himself out of the countries that lay about his own lands of Joyous Gard in the northern marches.

Then fresh rumors went about, and these were the most evil of all. It was said that he sought to slay the king, and wished to make Gwenevere his own queen, and with her he would rule over all Britain.

First, men laughed and passed the rumors with a shrug and a gesture of scorn; but when they were repeated again and again, some began half to believe them. Many said that there must be some truth therein, for Sir Lancelot was ever wending his way to the north country, and fought there many battles and overcame many knights.

But others said this was because many ladies and damsels, who had lost lands and homes and been evilly oppressed by the warring barons in those parts, had heard of his great fame for knightly deeds and noble manners, and came beseeching him to be their champion against those who had robbed them.

Others said that it was but natural that when he was at the court he should speak much to the queen, for he had from the first vowed himself to be her knight, and many deeds of daring and prowess had he done for her.

Yet others there were who believed that what rumor said might be true; and others, who were good and noble knights, sorrowed to think that such evil thoughts should be spread about by some treacherous tongues.

When men came to ask who had set these evil tongues to wag, it was always found that a certain mean knight, named Sir Pinel, had first spoken wrong of Lancelot and Sir Bors and the queen. And men noticed that it was not long before the queen began to look coldly at Sir Pinel, and then they knew that his rumors had reached her ears.

'What profit doth Sir Pinel think to gain from those false tales of her?' said Sir Brastias one day, as he and Sir Gareth came from the hawking together. 'For none ever reckoned him as a knight of any merit, and all good men will now think less of him.'

'I fear me,' said Sir Gareth, 'that there is more beneath it all than we wot of. Sir Pinel is a bosom friend of Sir Mordred's. Often have I seen their heads together in places apart. And though he is my brother, Sir Mordred is one I cannot love.'

'What fear you, Gareth?' asked Sir Brastias.

'I fear naught that he may do,' said Gareth, 'but I think he hates Sir Lancelot and he hates Gawaine also, the chief of our party, because he

hath roundly told Mordred that he is a traitor, and that he will not be drawn from his firm friendship with Sir Lancelot and his kinsmen. I think Sir Mordred would do much to cause some ill to Gawaine or Sir Lancelot, so long as his own evil body was not hurt.'

Now it befell that the poor queen had heard, through her maidens, of the rumors concerning herself and Sir Lancelot, and, taking counsel of no one, she bethought how she could prove to the remnant of the Round Table that she was free of any plots against the king or the fair kingdom of Britain.

She resolved that she would invite the knights to a privy dinner, and when they had eaten she would throw herself upon their knightly pity and honor, telling them how the evil rumors wronged and hurt her bitterly. And she doubted not that thus their manly sympathy and worship of her, their queen, would, by her words, cast out the evil effects of the slanderous tales.

Therefore, at that dinner, she had Sir Gawaine and his brethren, that is to say, Sir Gareth, Sir Agravaine, Sir Gaheris and Sir Mordred. Also there were the kin of Sir Lancelot, to wit, Sir Bors, Sir Blamore, Sir Bleobaris, Sir Ector de Maris, and Sir Lionel. But Sir Lancelot had gone into the Scottish marches, to do battle with a notable robber and oppressor there. There were other knights, making in all the number of twenty-four. And these were all the remnant of the one hundred and fifty that had gone forth in the Quest of the Sangreal.

Among the guests were Sir Pinel and his cousin, Sir Mador.

Now Sir Gawaine had a custom of eating apples which he used daily at dinner and supper. He loved all manner of fruit, and in especial a certain brown or russet apple, which was called Afal Coch.

The queen had known this, and among the fruit for the table she had ordered such apples to be placed.

Now Sir Mordred, as Sir Gareth had suspected, hated Sir Gawaine with a deep hatred, and therefore he had, by crafty dealing, taken all the russet apples from the dish except one, and into this he had thrust a deadly poison. He guessed that, as everyone knew of Sir Gawaine's fondness for that sort of fruit, no one would take it, but would leave it for Sir Gawaine, who would eat it and die thereof.

When the feast was near an end, and men laughed and jested together, the dish of fruit was handed round, and Sir Pinel, the mean knight, noticed that there was but one of the apples which Sir Gawaine loved; and to spite that knight, whom he hated, he took that apple, ere the dish went to Sir Gawaine.

Sir Mordred saw him take it, yet would not cry out to warn his fellow-traitor, for this would have revealed himself. He saw Sir Pinel's teeth sink into the brown apple, and Sir Pinel's sneering look as he glanced across at Sir Gawaine, who was searching vainly in the dish for his favorite fruit.

Then Sir Mordred saw Sir Pinel's face go red, and then deadly white. And as the poison gripped him, Sir Pinel rose shrieking from the table, crying out that some enemy had poisoned him.

Then he sank writhing to the ground, shrieking and moaning, clutching at the ground and at the legs of the chairs. Suddenly, with a great groan, he lay still and was dead.

Every knight leaped from the table, ashamed, full of rage and fear, nigh out of their wits, but dumb. They looked at each other and then at the dead Sir Pinel, and all their eyes kept from the face of the queen, where she sat on the high seat, with two of her ladies beside her.

The reason they could not speak was that they knew the queen had heard of the evil tales which Sir Pinel had spread about her, and that she must have hated him bitterly. And she had made this feast, and had invited him thereto, and now he was dead at the board, by means of deadly poison placed in the food which she had set before him.

Then for very shame some began to leave the chamber; and others could not bear to look upon the queen, who sat with a face that went now pale, now red. She had seen what happened, and who it was had been slain, and she had read the suspicion in men's gestures.

Then the voice of Sir Mador rang out, and checked men from going from the room, and drew all eyes to where he stood, a tall and burly man, red and angry of face, and fierce of eyes.

'Look!' he cried, and held between his fingers

and high above his head the apple which Sir Pinel had bitten, 'this is the thing whereof my kinsman, Sir Pinel, hath lost his life. The matter shall not end here, for I have lost a noble knight of my blood, and I will be revenged to the uttermost.'

Then, turning, he savagely looked at the queen, and with fierce rolling eyes he roared out:

'Thou art the murderess! Thou—the queen! Hear me, knights and chieftains. I charge the queen with the murder of my kinsman, Sir Pinel, and justice upon her will I have.'

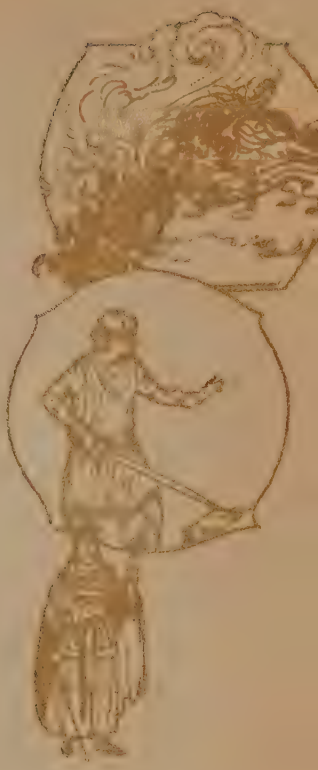
Everyone in the hall stood still as if they were of stone. None could gainsay him, none could utter a word on behalf of the queen, for all had suspicion that she had slain Sir Pinel for his slanders of her.

Then suddenly the queen rose, white and trembling.

'My lords and knights, I did not cause it!' she cried in a broken voice. 'I am innocent! I know not how it came!'

Sir Mordred's pale face smiled with a bitter sneer. He knew not then whether what had happened would help his evil plots or no; but he resolved to say naught, and so went out with all the other silent knights, whilst the ladies of the queen took her up lamenting, and bore her to her chamber.

With the noise and the sorrow that was in the court, King Arthur came and craved to know what was the matter; but none of the silent knights would speak until he met Sir Gawaine, who replied, and said:



'Sir, the queen did invite us to a privy feast with her. And one of the knights did eat of the fruit on the table, and he is dead by poison. Therefore, I dread lest the queen will be shamed for this.'

Then suddenly the queen rose, white and trembling.

King Arthur was passing heavy at the hearing of these words, and went unto the queen to comfort her.

On the next day, when the king sat in the hall

with his two court judges, as was his wont daily, to hear any causes or charges which might be brought before him, all men stood with gloomy faces, and there was no laughing and jesting talk, as was usual at this time.

Sir Mador came forward and charged the queen of murder, and required that justice should be done upon her.

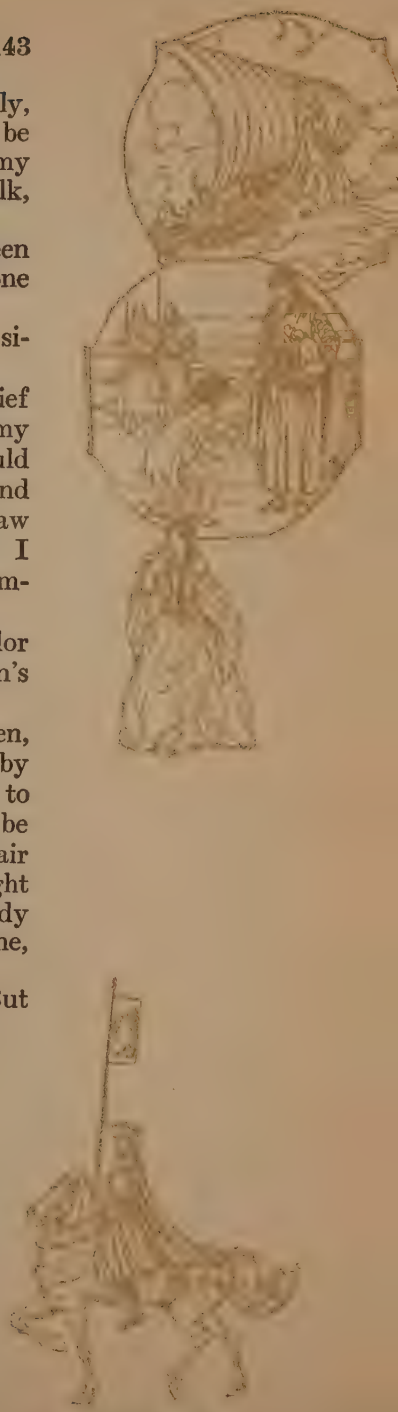
The king heard him with a sad face and in silence. Then he said:

'Fair lords and noble knights, heavy is my grief for this, and rather would I give my life for my queen at this moment than that my tongue should frame so evil a charge against my dear wife and your noble queen. But I am here to see that law is done, as justly to the highest as to the lowest. I doubt not that God will soon clear her of this seeming evil.'

'I know not how that may be,' said Sir Mador angrily, 'for the evil deed is clear to any man's eyes.'

'I deem this deed was never done by my queen, nor by her desire,' said the king sternly, 'but by some traitor that would do her evil and wishes to see her die. But as I am her judge, I may not be her champion and fight against you for her fair fame. I doubt not, however, that some good knight will take this charge upon himself, and put his body in jeopardy for my queen. For if this be not done, dost thou know what is the penalty?'

'She must be burnt,' said Mador sullenly. 'But



she hath done the deed and will merit the doom.'

'Cease, hasty man,' said King Arthur sternly; 'it goeth to my heart to hear ye pronounce the doom thou wouldst visit upon that fair lady. Fear not, Sir Mador, she shall find some good knight to do combat for her. Therefore do thou name thy day of battle.'

'But hark ye, lord,' said Sir Mador, 'there is none of the four-and-twenty knights that were bidden to this dinner that hath not suspicion of the queen for this deed. Therefore, no knight can take this charge upon him in her behalf. What say ye, my lords?'

He turned to the silent, moody men about the dais.

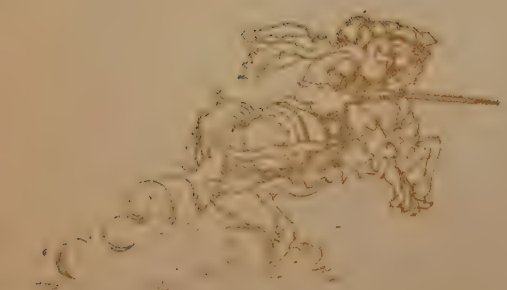
The knights looked troubled, and were dumb for some moments; but at the last Sir Gawaine said:

'We cannot excuse the queen, for she gave the feast. And either the poison came by her will or by her servants.'

But most of the knights were silent, and Sir Bors and his kindred were very sorrowful. King Arthur was heavy at the words of Sir Gawaine.

'Now, king,' cried Sir Mador triumphantly, 'I require ye, as ye be a righteous king, give me a day that I may have justice.'

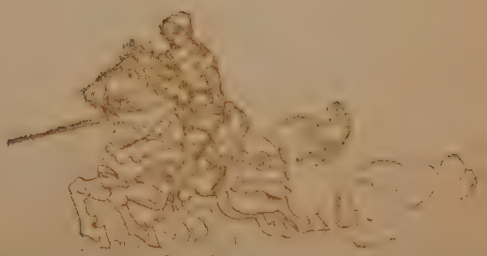
'That will I do,' said the king, 'as I must do, that am a just king. I give you this day fifteen days, that ye be ready armed on horseback in the meadow beside the wall at London; and if it so fall out that there be a knight to encounter with you, then God speed the right; and if there be no



When he was come she threw herself on her knees full piteously before him, and wept sorely, and begged that he would save her from this dreadful death.

knight to take arms for my queen, then must she suffer by fire.'

So sorrowful were the king's words that many knights had much ado to keep from weeping.



'And meanwhile,' said Sir Mador, 'I do require that ye keep the queen in close ward and prison, lest any try a rescue, and thus defeat the justice that is my due.'

Though it went to the king's heart to have to order this, he gave the queen into the keeping of Sir Kay, who kept her in her chamber, guarded by three knights, to the great grief of her women and all the court.

Then the queen sent for Sir Bors, and when he was come she threw herself on her knees full piteously before him, and wept sorely, and begged that he would save her from this dreadful death.

'For by my confession unto Heaven,' she cried, 'I know naught of this wicked deed how it was brought about. And will ye not take this combat upon ye for my sake? For I am sure if your kinsman, Sir Lancelot, was here, he would not suffer this evil suspicion to lie against me. For he hath ever been my most faithful knight, but now am I without friend in this great pass.'

'Madam,' replied Sir Bors, 'what can I do? For if I take this charge upon me for your sake, men will say I was your aider in this crime that they charge upon you. And I see not how I may fight for you except by endangering my own life without saving yours. But I tell ye, madam, what I will do. I will hasten with all speed to the north, trusting in God to get news of Sir Lancelot, so that I may tell him and bring him here within the time appointed.'

'Ah, good Sir Bors,' cried the queen, and clasped

his hands. 'Do ye do that, for I know that Sir Lancelot will never believe me guilty of so great a crime. And I will pray hourly that ye find him and bring him to me in time, so that my poor body be not unjustly given to the dreadful flames.'

No rest did the good Sir Bors give to himself, but swiftly did he ride hither and thither questioning all knights whom he met, and inquiring of every hermitage and abbey and at every harborage. Finally, when eleven days had passed of the fifteen, he found Sir Lancelot lying wounded at a broken abbey, from which, in a fierce fight, he had but two days before thrust out a band of pagans who would have murdered the nuns and robbed the church of its holy relics.

A band of pagans would have murdered the nuns.

Full wroth was Sir Lancelot when, having lovingly greeted each other, Sir Bors told him all that had passed with the queen.

'The foul traitors!' he cried, and, getting fiercely

from the pallet on which he lay, he strode up and down the chamber, clenching his hands and gnashing his teeth. 'Do any dare to suspect her—do any think in cold blood to see that peerless lady bound to the stake, the flames devouring her noble person? That men should think such things and move not a hand in noble wrath shows how evil are the days in which we live!'

Then he rushed from the room, wounded as he was; and, full of a cold wrath, he ordered his arms to be brought and his horse to be saddled.

With Sir Bors he rode southwards, full fiercely, and never resting to eat, but taking food as he rode. At night he would not doff his armor, but slept beside his horse, and seldom spoke, but was consumed as by a great fire of anger. And on the fourteenth day they rode into London.

'Go beg the queen to see me,' he said to Sir Bors.

Sir Bors went, and Sir Lancelot strode unto an hostelry to wash from himself the stains of travel, and to don a fitting robe in which to appear before the queen.

Now it had befallen, while Sir Bors had been absent from the court seeking for Sir Lancelot, that Sir Mordred and Sir Agravaine had made a plot with each other against him and against Sir Lancelot. And they caused it to be noised in all the court that Sir Bors had gone to seek Sir Lancelot, and that Sir Bors was privy to the plots which Sir Lancelot and the queen had made to wrest the kingdom from King Arthur and to reign together in his stead. They said that Sir Bors had gone to

warn Sir Lancelot that the time was ripe to strike.

Wherefore many knights were greatly displeased to hear this news, but some would not believe it and said that Sir Bors had gone to tell Sir Lancelot of the jeopardy in which the queen's life was placed, and to ask him to do battle for her.

Daily the party which inclined to Sir Mordred and Sir Agravaine gained power, and some were for going to tell the king of the evil designs which Sir Lancelot and Sir Bors and the queen had against his person and the kingdom. But Sir Mordred said, 'No, the time is not yet ripe. Wait a while.'

The guard that was set about the queen's chamber was doubled, and all were knights that were well-willers to the plots of Sir Mordred and Sir Agravaine.

When, therefore, Sir Bors came and asked to see the queen, they let him go to her; but Sir Agravaine hid himself and listened to all that passed between Sir Bors and the queen. Then he went and told the others that Sir Lancelot was waiting to speak to the queen, and he counseled that they should let him come, and then when he came forth again, as he would be unarmed, they could fall upon him and capture him, and take him before the king and charge him with his treason.

And with the consent of Sir Mordred this was so agreed; and he advised that most of them should hide from before the door, so that Sir Lancelot should not think the guard was strong.

'For,' said Sir Mordred, 'if he sees there is no

great watch kept, he may strive to free the queen, and when we take him it will be blacker against him.'

When, therefore, Sir Bors came forth from his audience with the queen, he found but one knight at the door.

Going to Sir Lancelot, he told him that the queen would see him at once; 'but,' added Sir Bors, 'ye shall not go this night by my counsel, nor should you go before there are more of our kinsmen near us to aid us in case of need.'

'Why?' said Sir Lancelot.

'Sir,' said Sir Bors, 'I misdoubt me of Sir Agravaine and Sir Mordred. There was a great watch before the door of the queen's room when I entered; but when I came hence there was but one. And I mistrust them that stood there. For all were of Sir Mordred's evil company, and peradventure they lay some snare for you, and I dread me sore of treachery.'

'Have ye no doubt,' said Sir Lancelot, 'for I shall go and come again and make no tarrying.'

'Sir,' replied his cousin, 'that me sore repenteth. But if you will, I will go and seek some of our kinsmen to meet us near by. And do you not go until I have found them.'

'Nay, I will not stay,' said Sir Lancelot, 'and I marvel me much why ye say this, for they dare do naught against me.'

Sir Lancelot departed, taking his sword underneath his arm, while Sir Bors went forth to find some of their kin. He learned, however, that many

of them had gone forth with the king to punish a bandit lord in the forest of the Weald, and would not return before the morrow, when the combat should be held for the queen.

Sir Lancelot came to the door of the queen's prison and found Sir Petipace there, and demanded to be let in to see the queen.

'We thought you were in the north, Sir Lancelot,' said the young knight, with a laugh, 'and surely it will pleasure our lady queen to see you.'

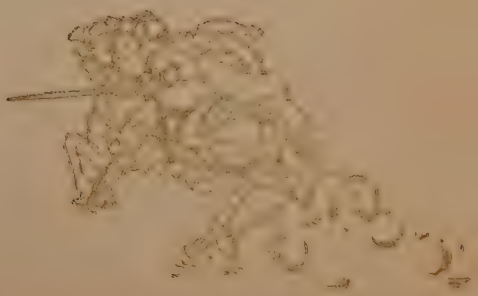
He unlocked the door of the queen's antechamber, and told her waiting-woman that Sir Lancelot would see the queen, and in a few moments Sir Lancelot was let in. The sorrowing queen told him all that had happened, and how, and he was wroth to think that any one should suspect her of so great a crime. He promised that on the day appointed he would fight for her with all his strength, as a true knight should, and God would defend the right.

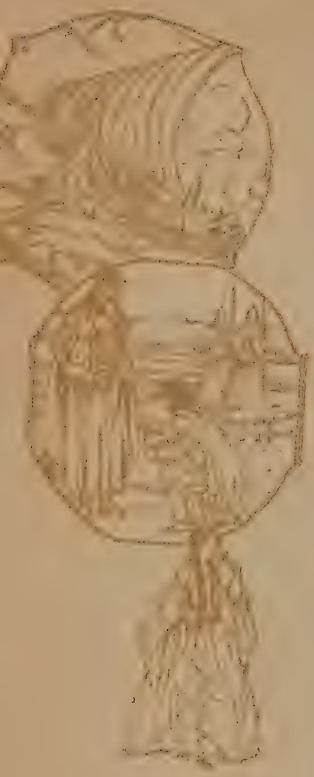
Suddenly, as they spoke together, there came loud voices crying outside the chamber door:

'Traitor knight, Sir Lancelot du Lake, now art thou taken in thy treachery!'

Sir Lancelot knew that the voices were those of Sir Agravaine, who had ever been envious of him, and of Sir Mordred, whom no one loved. He went quickly to the door and barred it with the beam, and bade the terrified queen not to be alarmed. He asked her whether there was any armor in the room, which he could put on to defend himself.

'I have none,' she said, weeping sorely, 'where-





fore I dread me sore that evil will come to you, my true and valiant knight, for I hear by their noise there be many strong knights, wherefore ye are like to be slain soon, and then shall I surely burn.'

'Traitor knight,' cried those that were hammering at the door with the handles of their swords, 'come out at once and skulk there no more, for know ye well thou art so beset that thou shalt not escape.'

Sir Lancelot went to the queen and, kneeling to her, took her hand and kissed it, saying:

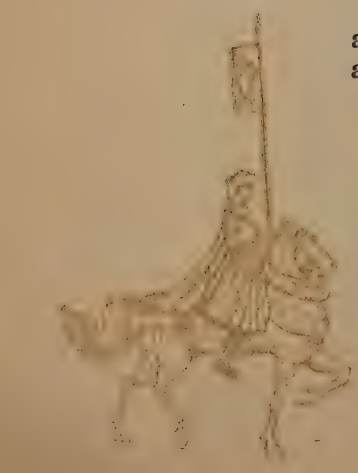
'Madam, I beseech you to pray for my soul if I be slain. I have been your true knight with all my power up to this time, and now I will not fail you if I may; but if I be slain, I am assured that my kinsman Sir Bors and all the others of my kin will not suffer you to go to the fire."

Then Sir Lancelot, leaving the weeping queen, wrapped his mantle round his left arm as if it were a shield, and prepared to sell his life dearly. By this time the knights outside had got a bench from the hall, and using it as a battering-ram, were dashing it against the door to beat it in.

'Leave your noise, fair lords,' rang out the voice of Lancelot, 'and I will open the door to ye, and then ye may do to me what ye will.'

'Do it then,' they cried, 'and we will give you your life until we take thee to King Arthur, to be judged for your treason.'

Sir Lancelot unbarred the door and held it open a little way, so that one knight only might enter at a time. One entered, a big slow man, named



Sir Colgreve, and swiftly Sir Lancelot slammed the door and fastened it, to keep the others out.

Sir Colgreve turned and struck at Sir Lancelot; but the latter put the stroke lightly aside with his sword, and gave so swift and keen a blow upon the other's helm that Sir Colgreve fell down dead.

Then, while the others hammered and yelled outside the door, Sir Lancelot swiftly took off the armor of the dead knight, and with the help of the queen and her waiting-woman was armed in it.

Again the knights outside had begun to dash at the door to beat it down. Sir Lancelot, when he was armed, strode to it and cried out:

'Let be your noise, and go away, for ye shall not prison me this night. And I promise ye, by my knighthood, that I will appear to-morrow before the king, and then such of ye as dare may accuse me of treason, and I will then prove that I am a true man and no traitor.'

'Fie on thee, false traitor,' cried Sir Agravaine and Sir Mordred, 'but we will have thee this night and slay thee.'

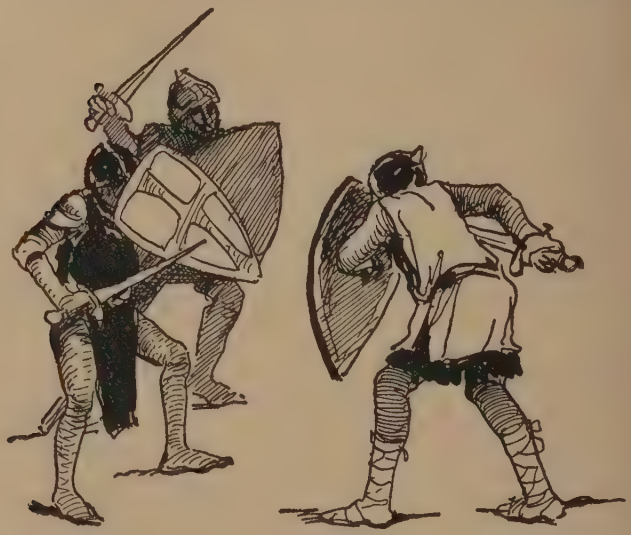
'Then, sirs,' replied Sir Lancelot, 'if ye will not take my counsel, look well to yourselves.'

With that Sir Lancelot threw the door open suddenly, and while the others struggled and tripped over the bench between them he had run two of them through.

Then in that narrow ante-chamber there was as fierce a fight as ever brave knight might wish to see. Sir Mordred from behind urged on the others with evil words, telling them to slay Sir Lancelot,

while he launched at that knight all manner of foul names.

Fiercely did Sir Lancelot fight, for he was full of rage; and as in the narrow place in which he



No more than two could come at him at once.

stood, no more than two could come at him at once, he could not be overwhelmed by their numbers. There were ten of them, and so full of force were his blows and so skillful his thrusts, that in a little while seven lay slain, two were badly wounded, and the last, who was Sir Mordred, barely escaped with his life, and bore a deep wound with him.

Sir Lancelot, sorely wounded, returned to the queen, and said:

'Madam, I know not what is this treason with which they charge me; but I doubt not it will go ill with me, for I have killed many of the kin of the king and of Sir Gawaine this night. And I misdoubt me that the king himself will be my foe also. Nevertheless, I will save you, if it is in my power, from the danger that threatens you.'

'Go ye, Sir Lancelot,' the queen besought him, 'ere the men-at-arms come, which are so many ye may never hope to escape them. I dread me sorely that much ill will come of this, and of the evil plots which our enemies weave about us.'

Then, kneeling, Sir Lancelot kissed the queen's hand, and went from the prison. He took his way to the lodging of Sir Bors, who showed his great gladness to see him again. And when he had been unarmed and his wounds stanched and bound, Sir Lancelot told him what had befallen him.

'And now I beseech you,' said Sir Lancelot, 'be of good heart, in whatever great need we stand, for now I fear war must come of it all. But what is the treason they would charge me with I know not; yet I dread it meaneth much evil plotting against me and the peace of this fair kingdom.'

'Sir,' said Sir Bors, 'your enemies and those that envy your great fame have spread many evil reports about you. They say that you plot to slay the king and to take Queen Gwenevere to wife, to reign over this kingdom with you.'

With that Sir Lancelot was so astounded that for

some moments he could not speak. Then he said:

'By my confession unto Heaven, this is as foul a plot against me as ever fiend could fashion. And it showeth how far they will go to pull me down and dishonor me. And doth the king know of these evil rumors?'

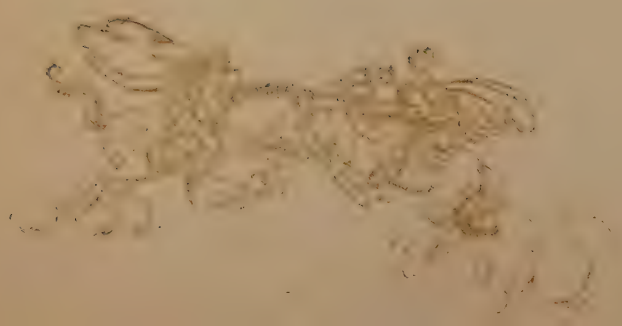
'I know not,' replied Sir Bors, 'but I doubt not that Sir Mordred will not rest his horse till he hath found the king and poisoned his mind against thee.'

'Had I known of this,' said Sir Lancelot,' I would have brought the queen away with me and put her in a safe place, for now I know that her enemies and mine will not rest until she and I be slain.'

But Sir Bors counseled him not to attempt a rescue then, for day was breaking, the town was awake, and the court would be full of the armed retainers of the slain knights.

Then, while Sir Lancelot rested himself Sir Bors went out to the lodgings of such of his kinsmen as might not be gone with the king, and he found that now all had returned to London with the king, that Sir Mordred had met them on their way, and had told King Arthur of the fight, and had, moreover, charged Sir Lancelot and the queen of conspiring together to gain the crown.

Sad indeed was Sir Bors to hear this; but, going about the town, he got together the kinsmen of Sir Lancelot and such of his friends as would cast in their lot with him in so weighty and terrible a thing as civil war. By seven of the clock he had got together good and valiant knights to the number of fourscore, all horsed and armed.



Then he told them to betake themselves to a privy place in a wood beyond the city walls to the north, and there in a little while came Sir Lancelot with Sir Bors, and held counsel with them. He told them all that had befallen him in the fight with the twelve knights, and they in their turn related how Sir Mordred had met them and had told his evil tales against the queen and Lancelot, and how for long the king was too wroth and too sad to listen. But afterwards, when Sir Mordred told how Sir Pinel, who had spoken of these things, had been poisoned at the feast given by the queen, King Arthur had wept, and then was very stern and quiet and said no word more.

'Now, my lords,' said Sir Lancelot, when they had done speaking, 'ye know well how evil are these plots, how baseless are these foul rumors against me. But now they have been launched against me, and I have slain men on account of them, I fear we shall be hard put to it to get peace again. Those men were set on to betray me; and I doubt not mine enemies will have the queen burnt, to revenge themselves upon her and upon me. Therefore, fair lords, what counsel do ye give?'

'Sir,' said Sir Bors, when they had spoken together a little, 'we think there is but one thing to be done first: that ye knightly rescue the queen, if your enemies force the king to put her to the stake. For if she be burnt, then it would be to your shame, seeing that you vowed yourself her true knight when she came, a young fair bride, to our king, twenty years agone. And in whatsoever way ye

would rescue her, ye may count upon us to our last breath.'

With a great shout all the other knights raised their right hands in the air and cried: 'Yea! yea!'

Then, by the advice of Sir Lancelot, they kept hidden in the little wood, while one went into the city to learn what was being done, and in what manner the queen was to be treated.

Meanwhile, in the hall of the palace of King Arthur, men sat or stood with anxious looks, glancing in silence at the king, as he walked up and down apart, with a stern look on his face.

Then Sir Mador strode forward and said:

'Lord, I do require you to perform your promise to me, to wit, that the queen be brought to the stake, unless one be found to do combat on her behalf.'

'What I have promised I will fulfill,' said the king; and men sorrowed to see how heavy of anguish were his looks, and full of sorrow his words.

'Lord king,' said Sir Mordred, 'we have shamefully suffered much wrong at the hands of Sir Lancelot. I appeal to thee that he be seized, so that the kin of those whom he slew this last night may have vengeance upon him.'

Then came Sir Gawaine forward quickly, and his face was dark with anger and his words hot.

'Lord,' he cried, 'listen not to such tales, for I doubt not it was only by evil plots that Sir Lancelot was forced to slay those whom he slew. For I trust not Sir Mordred.'

'So God us help,' said Sir Gareth and Sir

Gaheris, 'we too will not be known to be of the same mind as our brother Sir Mordred.'

'Then will I do as I deem it best, to gain what I deem right,' replied Sir Mordred.

'I believe that thou wilt do it in thine own hidden ways,' said Sir Gawaine, and looked fiercely at his brother, 'for in all unhappiness and evil thou art to be found, if men but seek in the darkest place and look for the most secret foe.'

'I appeal to you, lord,' said Sir Mordred to the king, 'to proclaim Sir Lancelot a false traitor to you and to your realm.'

'And I,' said Sir Gawaine, 'will bid ye remember, lord king, that if ye will make war between us and Sir Lancelot, there will be many kings and great lords hold with him. And I would ask you, how many times hath Sir Lancelot done noble deeds on our behalf and proved himself the best knight of us all? Did he not rescue twenty of us from the dungeons of Sir Turquine? Hath he not avenged shame upon the king and the queen, and the fame of the Round Table many a time? Methinketh, my uncle, that such kind deeds should be well remembered.'

'Think ye,' said the king, 'that I am not loath to begin so evil and terrible a thing as civil war? Man, it rendeth my heart to think it. And I tell thee, Sir Mordred, I will not begin it, except I have proofs of what ye charge upon Sir Lancelot. And as he is the best knight of ye all, and the most valiant, I will not judge him before I hear him. If I know him well, he will come hither and challenge

the knights to combat that doth bring these charges against him, and in that will I trust, for God shall surely defend the right. Therefore, let a messenger be sent to Sir Lancelot requiring him, by his knighthood, to appear before me here, and make answer to the charges thou hast against him.'

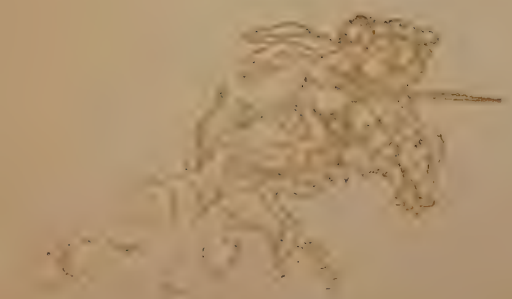
This was not as Sir Mordred desired; for he did not doubt that if Sir Lancelot came he would have little trouble to persuade the king that he was innocent. When the messenger was gone, therefore, Sir Mordred sent a servant after him, who slew him in a wood and hid his body under a bush.

Meanwhile, Sir Mordred counselled Sir Mador to repeat his demand that the king should cause the queen to be led to the stake, since no knight had come forward and offered to fight for her.

For a time the king put him off, hoping that as soon as Sir Lancelot received his commands he would come instantly. Very anxiously did the king look to the door, hoping to see the tall form of his best knight come towering through the hall.

Instead thereof came the crafty servant of Sir Mordred, throwing himself at the feet of the king.

'Gracious lord,' cried he, panting as if from swift running, 'I have even now come from the place where Sir Lancelot and his friends are hiding. I am one of their servants, but I hate their treason against ye, and therefore I am come to tell you of this greatest treason of all. They have slain your messenger, my lord, him that came requiring Sir Lancelot to appear before thee. Sir Lancelot ran upon him when he gave his message and slew him,



saying, "Thus do I answer the saucy words of him who shall not much longer be king."'

The king looked at the face of the messenger long and sadly. The pain which the king suffered would have softened any ordinary heart; but the murderer was a hard callous wretch, and his brazen eyes outlooked the king.

'Then is Sir Lancelot changed indeed,' said the king, and walked away with bowed head and moist eyes.

Sir Mador pushed forward again, repeating his demand.

'Have it as ye will,' said the king heavily, and went quickly into his private chamber.

'Alas!' said Sir Gawaine and Sir Gareth, 'now is the whole realm falling to ruin, and the noble fellowship of the Round Table shall be scattered in civil war.'

Soon a page came to Sir Gawaine, telling him that the king would speak to him.

'Gawaine,' said the king, when the knight went to him, 'I have been too easy with this knight, Sir Lancelot. He hath slain eleven knights of the Round Table and my messenger. The pride and ambition of that man shall have a check. His great fame for valiant deeds hath made him mad, until it would seem that nothing but this realm will content him. Now, therefore, as justice demands, and Sir Mador requires, do ye lead the queen to the fire. She shall have the law as is right. Afterwards we will seize Sir Lancelot; and know ye, he shall have a hard and shameful death.'

'Nay, most noble lord,' replied the knight sadly, 'that will I never do. I will never stand by to see so noble a queen meet so shameful a death.'

'Heaven forbid,' said Sir Gawaine, 'that ever I should see either of these things. For I will believe not these reports of Sir Lancelot.'

'How now?' said the king. 'Truly ye have little cause to love him. This night last past he slew Sir Agravaine, your brother, and several of your kindred with him; and also, Sir Gawaine, remember how he slew but lately two sons of yours in battle against the oppressing lords of the borders.'

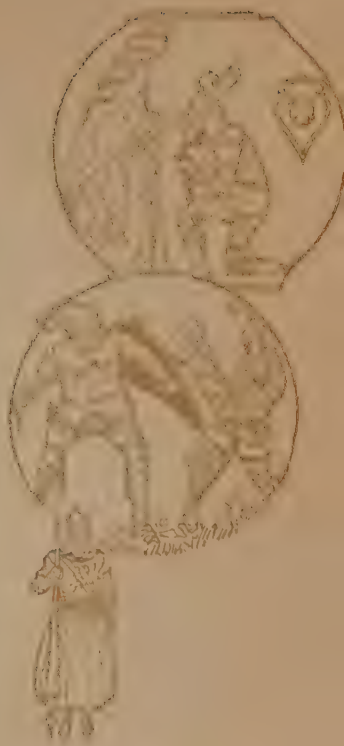
'My lord,' said Sir Gawaine, 'I know these things, and for their deaths I have grieved, but I warned them all, and as they sought their deaths willfully I will not avenge them, nor think worse of Sir Lancelot.'

'Nevertheless,' said the king, 'I pray you will make ready with your brothers, Sir Gaheris and Sir Gareth, to take the queen to the fire, there to have her judgment and receive her death.'

'They are younger than I,' replied Sir Gawaine, 'and they may not say you nay.'

The king commanded the two brothers of Sir Gawaine to come to him, and told them what he desired of them.

'Sir,' said Sir Gareth, 'it is in your power to command us to lead the queen to her shameful end; but wit you well it is sore against our will. We will go as ye bid, but it shall be in peaceable guise, for we tell you straightway, we will not oppose a rescue, should any so desire.'



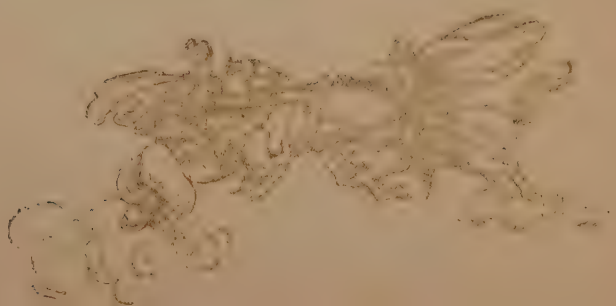
Then the two knights went to the queen and sorrowfully bade her prepare for her death. Very pale was the queen, but very quiet, for now that this was come which she had dreaded night and day, she would bear herself proudly like a queen, innocent as she knew she was of any crime.

Her ladies dressed her in her meanest garments; a priest, her confessor, was brought to her, and she was shriven of her sins. Then arose a weeping and a wailing and a wringing of hands among the lords and ladies.

Between the knights and the men-at-arms she was led through the streets to the lists beyond the wall. Lamentation, cries of horror, and the shrieks and sighs of women arose from the multitude which lined each side of the narrow streets. Many were the prayers that rose from white lips, praying God to send a miracle to rescue so sweet a lady from so dreadful a doom.

The city apprentices, with stout sticks in their hands, stood in bands, and in their stout young hearts was a great rage. It was in their minds to dash upon the guard of armored knights, to attempt a rescue, but they knew how vain their sticks would be against the keen blades of swords.

So stricken with horror were all those that looked on that they noticed not how, when the queen and her guard issued from the gates of the palace, a man in the coarse dress of a peasant, who was standing in the crowd, strode swiftly away down a narrow lane. There he vaulted, with an unpeasant-like deftness, upon a good steed that stood



in the charge of a young lad; and striking spurs in the horse's flank, he dashed away madly along the streets and through the northern gate into the fields.

Faggots of wood were piled about her feet.

Amidst the sorrowing people, with women crying and men muttering and looking darkly at the knights about her, the queen was led to the tilting-ground beyond the northern wall, and in the midst thereof was a stake. To this she was fastened with

a rope, and faggots of wood were piled about her feet up to her knees. Near her stood the priest of her household, trying to cheer her with comforting words; but the queen, pale and without tears, seemed to be dazed and as if she did not hear him.

A hundred knights ranged themselves behind the queen, some on horseback, but the most on foot. Many of them had followed the example of Sir Gaheris and Sir Gareth and stood without arms; but Sir Mador was on his horse, fully armed, and prepared for combat. Others of his kindred rode beside him.

Then Sir Gaheris called upon the herald to proclaim what the king had commanded.

'In the name of the king,' cried the herald, 'the queen hath been found guilty of the death of a knight by treason and poison, and his kinsmen have demanded due judgment upon her. But if any knight shall take upon himself to do battle for her, let him appear instantly. If none do appear, then shall she suffer the death by burning as the law doth appoint.'

The herald ceased; the people in the seats, craning this way and that, looked eagerly up and down the lists to see if any knight came.

They saw Sir Mador, in the forefront of the troop of mounted knights, glance about him; but no armed man moved forward to do battle for the innocence of the queen. Then he looked to where she stood, pale and still, and men saw him smile faintly, as if his cruel heart already rejoiced to think that she would surely burn.

A great stillness was on the multitude of people. The eyes of all the citizens of London were bent upon that long wide space of sand within the lists; many, blurred by tears, could not bear to look at the white figure in the midst of the faggots.

Men and women held their breath. They saw Sir Mador look towards Sir Gaheris, as if to ask him why he delayed giving the signal for the executioner to go forward to do his duty.

Sir Gaheris stood looking down the lists towards the great entrance. His brother, Sir Gareth, was beside him, and in the hearts of both were prayers which asked that something might happen to prevent them doing this dreadful deed upon their fair queen.

'I do call upon you, Sir Gaheris, to fulfill the law!'

Sir Mador's harsh voice rang out in the silence, startling all. With the sound, Sir Gaheris threw up his hands in a gesture of despair. He turned to the executioner, who stood beside a cauldron of fire, and pointed to the queen.

Horror held the great multitude in silence, and all eyes watched the man put his torch in the fire, and then carry it blazing towards the faggots.

Suddenly men heard a strange throbbing sound, as if from a distance; then quickly it changed into the fierce beat of horses' hoofs; and before many could realize what it meant, through the great gate at the end of the lists dashed knights in armor, on horses whose foam-flecked trappings showed at what a speed they had come.

At the head of them rode a great knight; and as men caught the device upon his shield a great roar of gladness burst from the throats of the people, while women sobbed for joy.

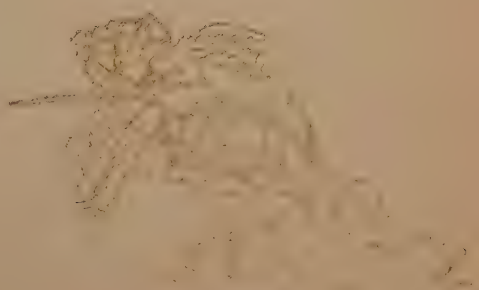
'Sir Lancelot! Sir Lancelot to the rescue!' was the cry.

As the knight entered, Sir Mador's quick commands sounded, and the knights about him ran forward and surrounded the queen. They had barely reached the place when, with a crashing sound, the party of Sir Lancelot was upon them. Many of Sir Mador's people were at once thrown headlong to the ground by the force of the shock; but the others fought fiercely.

This way and that the battle swayed; Sir Mador trying to thrust the others from the fire, and Sir Lancelot's kinsmen striving to reach the queen. All was in confusion; the knights on foot were mingled with those on horseback, and many were cut down who did not bear arms.

Full of a mad wrath was Sir Lancelot, as he raged among the knights that stood about the faggots; nor could any withstand him. So blind was he in his fury that he knew not whom he slew, except that they were men who stood between him and the queen.

So, by great mischance, at this rushing and hurtling, he slew two knights and knew not that they were unarmed, and that they were of those he loved most. One was Sir Gareth, whom he had himself knighted, and the other was Sir Gaheris. In very truth Sir Lancelot knew them not; and afterwards



they were found dead where the corpses lay thickest.

Short but very fierce was that battle, for none could long withstand the fury of Sir Lancelot and his kinsmen. Many were slain on both sides; Sir Mador had his head sheared from his shoulders by a stroke of Sir Lancelot's sword, and the remnant of his party fled.

Then Sir Lancelot rode to the queen, cut her bonds, and lifted her upon his horse full tenderly. Her eyes streamed with tears as she returned thanks to God for her deliverance, and hardly could she tell her gratitude to Sir Lancelot.

Thus, with the continued praise of the people in his ears, Sir Lancelot fared forth amidst his kinsmen, and taking the road northwards he rode with the queen to his own castle of Joyous Gard.

'For,' said he, 'I will keep the queen in safety until I know that the king is assured of our innocence of any treason against him. But I doubt our enemies have poisoned his mind, for never else would he have suffered her to go to the stake.'

But therein was Sir Lancelot in great error, as in much grief and remorse he came later to see; for if instantly he had taken the queen to the king, and had dared his enemies to prove his treason and the queen's, they would have been instantly discountenanced, and King Arthur would have known and loved him as he had ever done, for a true knight and a peerless one.

Nevertheless, Sir Lancelot would ever have had the hatred of Sir Gawaine, which was caused by

his slaying, though unwittingly, the two good knights, Sir Gaheris and Sir Gareth; whereof came great bale and sorrow.

CHAPTER VI

OF SIR GAWAINE'S HATRED, AND THE WAR WITH SIR LANCELOT

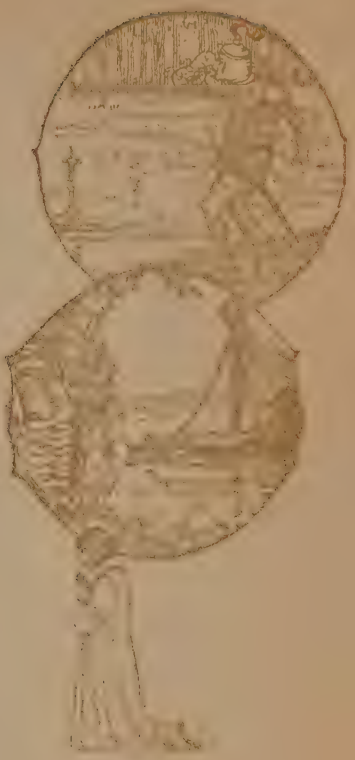
KING ARTHUR, in the hall of his palace in London, walked quickly up and down, thinking in great grief of the death of his queen.

Suddenly there came the sound of running footsteps; a man dashed into the hall, and threw himself at the feet of the king. It was a squire of Sir Mordred, and he craved leave to speak. 'Say on,' said the king.

'My lord,' said the man, 'Sir Lancelot hath rescued the queen from the fire and hath slain some thirty of your knights, and he and his kin have taken the queen away to some hiding-place.'

King Arthur stood for a little while dumb for pure sorrow; then, turning away, he wrung his hands and cried with a voice whose sadness pierced every heart: 'Alas, that ever I bare a crown, for now is the fairest fellowship of knights that ever the world held, scattered and broken.'

'Further, my lord,' went on the man, as others came into the hall, 'Sir Lancelot hath slain the brethren of Sir Gawaine, and they are Sir Gaheris and Sir Gareth.'



The king looked from the man to the knights that now surrounded him, as if that which he heard was past all belief.

'Is this truth?' he asked them, and all were moved at the sorrow on his face and in his voice.

'Yea, lord,' said they.

'Then, fair fellows,' he said, very heavily, 'I charge you that no man tell Sir Gawaine of the death of his two brothers; for I am sure that when he heareth that his loved younger brother, Sir Gareth, is slain, he will nigh go out of his mind for sorrow and anger.'

The king strode up and down the chamber, wringing his hands in the grief he could not utter.

'Why, oh why, did he slay them?' he cried out at length. 'He himself knighted Sir Gareth when he went to fight the oppressor of the Lady Lyones, and Sir Gareth loved him above all others.'

'That is truth,' said some of the knights, and could not keep from tears to see the king's grief, 'but they were slain in the hurtling together of the knights, as Sir Lancelot dashed in the thick of the press. He wist not whom he smote, so blind was his rage to get to the queen at the stake.'

Though the king had forbidden any of his knights to tell Sir Gawaine of the death of his two brothers, Sir Mordred called his squire aside, and bade him go and let Sir Gawaine know all that had happened.

'Do you see to it,' he told the man, 'that thou dost inflame his mind against Sir Lancelot.'

The knave went to Sir Gawaine, and found him

walking on the terrace of the palace overlooking the broad quiet Thames, where the small trading ships sailed up and down the river on their ways to and from Gaul and the ports of the Kentish coast.

'Sir,' said the squire, doffing his cap and bowing, 'great and woeful deeds have been toward this day. The queen hath been rescued by Sir Lancelot and his kin, and some thirty knights were slain in the melée about the stake.'

'Heaven defend my brethren,' said Sir Gawaine, 'for they went unarmed. But as for Sir Lancelot, I guessed he would try a rescue, and I had deemed him no man of knightly worship if he had not. But, tell me, how are my brethren?'

'Alas, sir,' said the man, 'they be slain.'

The grim face of Sir Gawaine went pale, and with an iron hand he seized the shoulder of the squire and shook him in his rage.

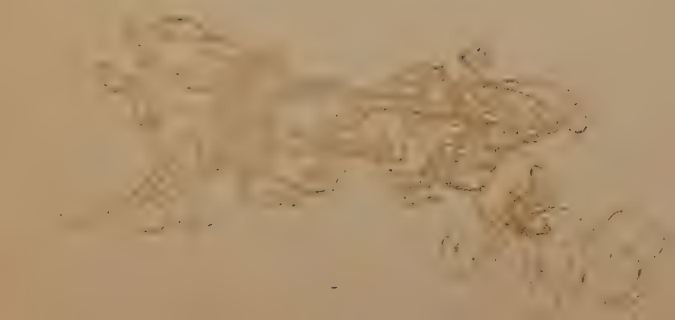
'Have a care, thou limb of Mordred's, if thou speakest lies,' he said. 'I would not have them dead for all this realm and its riches. Where is my young brother, Sir Gareth?'

'Sir, I tell ye truth,' said the man, 'for I know how heavy would be your anger if I lied in this. Sir Gareth and Sir Gaheris are slain, and all good knights are mourning them, and in especial the king our master.'

Sir Gawaine took a step backwards and his face went pale and then it darkened with rage.

'Tell me who slew them!' he thundered.

'Sir,' replied the man, 'Sir Lancelot slew them both.'



'False knave!' cried Sir Gawaine. 'I knew thou didst lie!'

He struck the man a great buffet on the head, so that he fell half dazed to the ground.

'Ha! ha! thou lying talebearer!' laughed Sir Gawaine, half relieved of his fears, yet still half doubtful. 'To tell me that Sir Lancelot slew them! Why, man, knowest thou of whom thou pratest? Sir Lancelot to slay my dear young brother Gareth! Why, man, Gareth loved Sir Lancelot as he loved me—not more than he loved me, but near as much; and Sir Lancelot was ever proud of him. 'Twas he that knighted my young brother Gareth, brave and hearty, noble of mind and goodly of look! He would have stood with Lancelot against the king himself, so greatly he loved him. And thou—thou foul-mouth!—thou tellest me that Lancelot hath slain him! Begone from my sight, thou split-tongue!'

'Nevertheless, Sir Gawaine,' said the man, rising, 'Sir Lancelot slew them both in his rage. As he would—saving your presence—have slain you had you stood between him and the queen at the stake.'

At these words, stubbornly spoken in spite of the furious looks of Sir Gawaine, the knight realized that the man was speaking the truth.

His look was fixed on the face of the knave, and rage and grief filled his eyes as he grasped the fact that his beloved brother was really slain. Then the blood surged into his face, and he dashed away.

Men started to see the wild figure of Sir Ga-

waine rushing through the passages, his eyes bloodshot, his face white. At length he dashed into the presence of the king.

'Ha! King Arthur!' he cried, half breathless, but in a great wild voice, 'my good brother, Sir Gareth, is slain, and also Sir Gaheris! I cannot bear the thought of them slain. It cannot be true! I cannot believe it!'

'Nay, nor can any think upon it,' said the king, 'and keep from weeping.'

'Ay, ay,' said Sir Gawaine in a terrible voice, 'there shall be weeping, I trow, and that ere long. Sir, I will go see my dead brothers. I would kiss them ere they be laid in earth.'

'Nay, that may not be,' said the king gently. 'I knew how great would be thy sorrow, and that sight of them would drive thee mad. And I have caused them to be interred instantly.'

'Tell me,' said Gawaine, and men marveled to see the wild look in his eyes and to hear the fierce voice, 'is it truth that Sir Lancelot slew them both?'

'It is thus told me,' said the king, 'that in his fury Sir Lancelot knew not whom he smote.'

'But, man,' thundered Sir Gawaine, 'they bare no arms against him! Their hearts were with him, and young Gareth loved him as if—as if Lancelot was his own brother.'

'I know it, I know it,' replied King Arthur. 'But men say they were mingled in the thick press of the fight, and Lancelot knew not friend from

foe, but struck down all that stood between him and the queen.'

For a space Sir Gawaine was silent, and men looked upon him with awe and compassion. His mane of hair, grizzled and wild, was thrown back upon his shoulders, and his eyes flamed with a glowing light as of fire. Suddenly he stepped up to the king, and lifting his right hand said, in a voice that trembled with rage:

'My lord, my king, and mine uncle, wit you well that now I make oath by my knighthood, that from this day I will seek Sir Lancelot and never rest till he be slain or he slay me. Therefore, my lord king, and you, my fellow knights and lords, I require you all to prepare yourselves for war; for, know you, though I ravage this land and all the lands of Christendom, I will not rest me nor slake my revenge until I come up to Lancelot and drive my sword into his evil heart.'

With that Sir Gawaine strode from the room, and for a space all men were silent, so fierce and full of hatred had been his words.

'I see well,' said the king, 'that the death of these twain knights will cause the deadliest war that hath ever raged, and never shall we have rest until Gawaine do slay Lancelot or is slain by him. O Lancelot! Lancelot! my peerless knight, that ever thou shouldst be the cause of the ruin of this my fair kingdom!'

None that heard the king could keep from tears; and many felt that in this quarrel the king's heart

was not set, except for the sake of Sir Gawaine, his nephew, and all his kin.

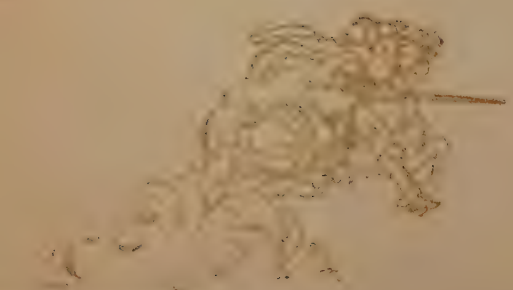
Then there were made great preparations in London and all the lands south of Trent, with sharpening of swords and spears, making of harness and beating of smiths' hammers on anvils.

Men's minds were in sore distress, and the faces of the citizens were long and white with dismay. Daily the quarrel caused other quarrels. Many a group of knights came to high words, some taking the side of Lancelot and the queen, and others that of the king and Sir Gawaine. Often they came to blows, and one or other of their number would be left writhing and groaning on the ground.

Families broke up in bad blood by reason of it, for the sons would avow their intent to go and enlist with Lancelot, while the fathers, in high anger at such disloyalty to Arthur, would send their tall sons away, bidding them never to look upon their faces again.

Women sorrowed and wept, for whichever side they took, it meant that one or other of their dear ones was opposed to them, and would go to battle, fighting against those of their own kin and of their own hearths.

Towards midsummer the host was ready, and took the road to the north. The quarrel had been noised abroad throughout Britain, and many kings, dukes and barons came to the help of Arthur, so that his army was a great multitude. Yet many others had gone to Lancelot, where he lay in his castle of Joyous Gard, not far from Carlisle.



Thither, in the month of July, when the husbandmen were looking to their ripening fields and thinking of harvest, King Arthur and Sir Gawaine drew with their army and laid a siege against the castle of Joyous Gard, and against the walled town which it protected. But for all their engines of war, catapults which threw great stones, and ramming irons which battered the walls, they could not make a way into the place, and so lay about it until harvest time.

One day, as Queen Gwenevere stood at a window of the castle, she looked down at the tents of the besieging host, and her gaze lingered on the purple tent of King Arthur, with the banner of the red dragon on the pole above it. As she looked, she saw her husband issue from the tent and begin to walk up and down alone in a place apart. Very moody did he seem, as he strode to and fro with bent head.

She went to Sir Lancelot, and said:

'Sir Lancelot, I would that this dreadful war were done, and that thou wert again friends and in peace with my dear lord. Something tells me that he sorrows to be at enmity with thee. Thou wert his most famous knight and brought most worship to the fellowship of the Round Table. Wilt thou not try to speak to my lord? Tell him how evil were the false reports of the conspiracy against him, and that we are innocent of any treason against him and this dear land.'

'Lady,' said Sir Lancelot, 'on my knighthood I will try to accord with my lord. If our enemies

have not quite poisoned his thoughts of us, he may listen and believe.'

Thereupon Sir Lancelot caused his trumpeter to sound from the walls, and ask that King Arthur would hold a parley with him.

In a little while King Arthur, with Sir Gawaine

Sir Lancelot came to a narrow window in the gate-tower.

and a company of his counselors and knights, came beneath the walls, and the trumpeters blew a truce, and the bowmen ceased from letting fly their arrows and the men-at-arms from throwing spears.

Then Sir Lancelot came down to a narrow window in the gate-tower, and cried out to the king:

'Most noble king, I think that neither of us may get honor from this war. Cannot we make an end of it?'

'Ay,' cried Sir Gawaine, his face red with anger, and shaking his mailed fist at Lancelot, 'come thou forth, thou traitor, and we will make an end of thee.'

'Come forth,' said the king, 'and I will meet thee on the field. Thou hast slain thirty of my good knights, taken my queen from me, and plunged this realm in ruin.'

'Nay, lord, it was not I that caused this war,' said Sir Lancelot. 'I had been but a base knight to have suffered the noble lady my queen to be burned at the stake. And it passes me, my lord king, how thou couldst ever think to suffer her to be burned.'

'She was charged with poisoning a knight who slandered her,' said the king. 'I must see justice done on high and low, and though it grieved me to condemn her, I could do naught else. Moreover, if Sir Pinel spoke true, both you and she were conspiring to slay me and to rule this kingdom in my stead.'

'A foul lie, a black calumny!' cried Sir Lancelot fiercely. 'And I would answer for it with the strength which God might give me on any six of your knights that may say I am so black a traitor. I tell you, my lord king, and I swear it on my knighthood, and may death strike me now if I lie, that neither I nor the queen have ever had evil

thoughts against your person, nor had designs upon your crown.'

At so solemn an oath men stood still and waited, for few doubted in those days that if a man who took so great an oath was speaking falsely, fire from heaven would instantly descend and consume him.

The moments passed and nothing happened, and men breathed again.

Sir Lancelot looked at the face of King Arthur, and saw by the light upon it that the king believed him; and Sir Lancelot rejoiced in his heart.

He saw the king turn to Sir Gawaine with a questioning air, as if he would ask what more his nephew wanted. But next moment, with a harsh laugh, Sir Gawaine spoke.

'Hark ye, Sir Lancelot, thou mayest swear to Heaven as to some things, and there are those that may be moved by thy round oaths. But this I charge upon thee, thou false, proud knight, that thou didst slay two unarmed men—men that loved thee and worshiped thee! Forsooth, thou boastful braggart and mouthing hero, thou wilt not dare to deny it!'

Sad was the face and voice of Sir Lancelot as he made reply.

'I cannot hope to find excuse from you,' he said, 'for I cannot and never will forgive myself. I would as lief have slain my nephew, Sir Bors, as slay young Gareth whom I loved, and Gaheris his brother. Sorrow is on me for that! I was mad in my rage and did not see them. Only I knew

that many knights stood between me and the queen, and I slew all that seemed to bar my passage.'

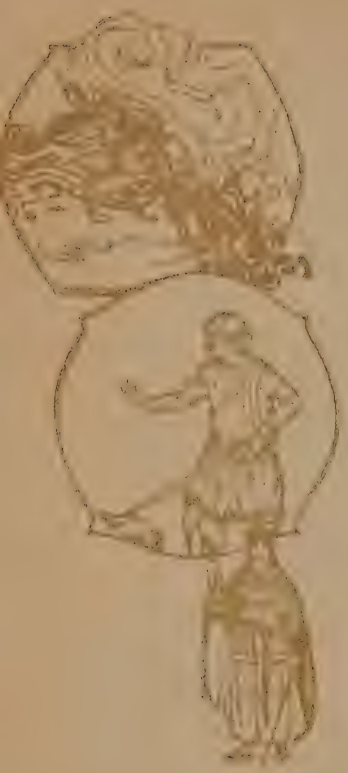
'Thou liest, false, recreant knight!' cried Sir Gawaine, whose grief by now had made him mad with the lust for revenge; 'thou slewest them in thy pride, to despite me and the king, because we had permitted the queen to go to the stake. Thou coward and traitor! Therefore, wit thee well, Sir Lancelot, I will not quit this quest until I feel my sword thrusting into thy evil heart.'

'Sorrow is on me,' said Sir Lancelot, 'to know that thou dost so hatefully pursue me. If thou didst not, I think my lord the king would give me his good grace again, and receive back his queen and believe us innocent.'

'I believe it well, false, recreant knight!' cried Sir Gawaine, full of rage to know that the king verily wished to have peace; 'but know ye that while I live, my good uncle will make war upon thee, and at last we will have thee in spite of thy castle walls and thy skill in battle. And then I will have thy head.'

'I trust ye for that,' said Sir Lancelot, 'for I see that thy hatred hath crazed thee. So, if ye may get me, I shall expect no mercy.'

Then, seeing how useless it was to keep up the parley any longer, Sir Lancelot withdrew. Next day spies brought in word to Sir Lancelot that, at a council of his chief men, the king had said he would take back his queen and make peace with Sir Lancelot; but that Sir Gawaine had fiercely told him that if he did not keep up the war until Sir



Lancelot was taken or slain, he and all the kin of Lot would break away from the realm and their allegiance. Indeed, it was rumored that Sir Gawaine would have made the king prisoner had he not yielded; and so powerful was Sir Gawaine and the lords that followed him, that none could have been strong enough to withstand them.

Sir Gawaine, yearning, by reason of his hatred, to get Sir Lancelot out of his castle to fight with him, now sent knights to cry out shame upon him under his walls. Thus they marched up and down, calling out insulting names and charging him with dishonorable deeds until at length the very men-at-arms that kept watch upon Sir Lancelot's walls reddened for shame, and hurled down spears and stones at the foul mouths. Sir Bors, Sir Ector de Maris and Sir Lionel, they also heard the words, and going to the other knights of Sir Lancelot, took counsel with them, and decided that this could no longer be suffered.

Together they went to Sir Lancelot and said to him:

'Wit ye well, my lord, that we feel great scorn of the evil words which Sir Gawaine spoke unto you when that ye parleyed with him, and also of these shameful names which men call upon ye for all the citizens to hear. Wherefore, we charge you and beseech you, if ye will to keep our service, hold us no longer behind these walls, but let us out, in the name of Heaven and your fair name, and have at these rascals.'

'Fair friends,' replied Sir Lancelot, 'I am full

loath to fight against my dear lord, King Arthur.'

'But if ye will not,' said Sir Lionel, his brother, 'all men will say ye fear to stir from these walls, and hearing the shameful words they cry, will say that there must be truth in them if ye seek not to silence them.'

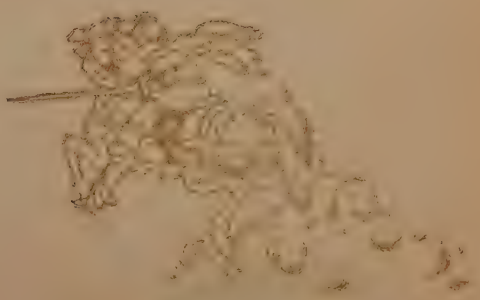
They spoke long with Sir Lancelot, and at length he was persuaded; and he sent a message to the king telling him that he would come out and do battle; but that, for the love he bore the king, he prayed he would not expose his person in the fight.

But Sir Gawaine returned answer that this was the king's quarrel, and that the king would fight against a traitor knight with all his power.

On the morrow, at nine in the morning, King Arthur drew forth his host, and Sir Lancelot brought forth his array. When they stood facing each other, Sir Lancelot addressed his men and charged all his knights to save King Arthur from death or wounds, and for the sake of their old friendship with Sir Gawaine, to avoid battle with him also.

Then, with a great hurtling and crashing, the knights ran together, and much people were there slain. The knights of Sir Lancelot did great damage among the king's people, for they were fierce knights, and burned to revenge themselves for the evil names they had heard.

Sir Gawaine raged like a lion through the field, seeking Sir Lancelot, and many knights did he slay or overthrow. Once, indeed, King Arthur, dashing through the fight, came upon Sir Lancelot.



'Now, Sir Lancelot,' he cried, 'defend thee, for thou art the causer of this civil war.'

At these words he struck at Sir Lancelot with his sword; but Sir Lancelot took no means to defend himself, and put down his own sword and shield, as if he could not put up arms against his king. At this the king was abashed and put down his sword, and looked sorrowfully upon Sir Lancelot.

Then the surging tide of battle poured between them and separated them, until it happened that Sir Bors saw King Arthur at a little distance. With a spear the knight rushed at the king, and so fierce was his stroke and hardy his blow that the king was stricken to the ground.

Whereupon Sir Bors leaped from his horse and drew his sword and ran towards the king. But some one called upon him, and looking up he saw Sir Lancelot riding swiftly towards him.

Sir Bors held the king down upon the ground by the nose-piece of his helm, and in his other hand he held his naked sword.

Looking up to Sir Lancelot, he cried in a fierce voice:

'Cousin, shall I make an end of this war? 'Twere easy done.'

He meant that, if the king were slain, Sir Gawaine would lose half his forces, and could not hope to keep up the war against Sir Lancelot single-handed.

'Nay, nay,' said Sir Lancelot, 'on peril of thy head touch not the king. Let him rise, man! I

will not see that most noble king, who made me knight and once loved me, either slain or shamed.'

Sir Lancelot, leaping from his horse, went and raised the king, and held the stirrup of his horse while the king mounted again.

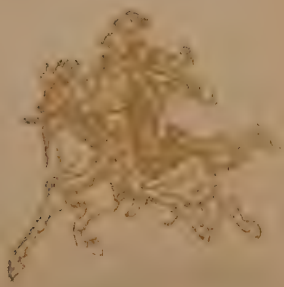
'My lord Arthur,' said Lancelot, looking up at the king, 'I would in the name of Heaven that ye cause this war to cease, for none of us shall get honor by it. And though I forbear to strike you and I try to avoid my former brothers and friends of the Round Table, they do continually seek to slay me and will not avoid me.'

King Arthur looked upon Lancelot, and thought how nobly courteous was he more than any other knight. The tears burst from the king's eyes and he could not speak, and sorrowfully he rode away and would fight no more, but commanded the trumpets to cease battle. Whereupon Sir Lancelot also drew off his forces, and the dead were buried and the wounded were tended.

Next morning the battle was joined again. Very fiercely fought the king's party, for Sir Gawaine had commanded that no quarter should be given, and that whoever slew a knight of Sir Lancelot's should have his helm filled with gold. Sir Gawaine himself raged like a lion about the field, his spear in rest. He sought for Sir Lancelot; but that knight always avoided him, and great was Gawaine's rage and scorn.

At length Sir Bors saw Sir Gawaine from afar, and spurred across the field towards him.

'Ha! Sir Bors,' cried the other mockingly, 'if



ye will find that cowardly cousin of thine, and bring him here to face me, I will love thee.'

'''Twere well I should not take thy words seriously,' mocked Sir Bors in his turn. 'For if I were to bring him to thee, thou wouldst sure repent it. Never yet hath he failed to give thee thy fall, for all thy pride and fierceness.'

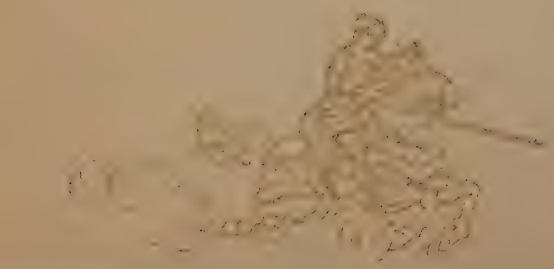
This was truth. Often in the jousting of earlier days, when Sir Lancelot had come in disguise and had been compelled to fight Sir Gawaine, the latter had had the worst. But Sir Lancelot, loving his old brother-in-arms as he did, had in later years avoided the assault with Sir Gawaine; yet the greater prowess and skill of Sir Lancelot were doubted by none.

Sir Gawaine raged greatly at the words of Sir Bors, for he knew they were true, though he had wished they were not.

'Thy vaunting of thy recreant kinsman's might will not avail thee,' he cried furiously. 'Defend thyself!'

'I came to have to do with thee,' replied Sir Bors fiercely. 'Yesterday thou did slay my cousin Lionel. To-day, if God wills it, thou thyself shall have a fall.'

Then they set spurs to their horses and met together so furiously that the lance of either bore a great hole in the other's armor, and both were borne backwards off their horses, sorely wounded. Their friends came and took them up and tended them, but for many days neither of the knights could move from their beds.



When the knights of Sir Lancelot saw that Sir Bors was grievously wounded, they were wroth with their leader. Going to him, they charged him with injuring his own cause.

'You will not exert yourself to slay these braggart foes of yours,' they said to him. 'What does it profit us that you avoid slaying knights because, though they are now your bitter foes, they were once brothers of the Round Table? Do they avoid ye, and seek not to slay you and us, your kindred and friends?'

Seeing by these words that he was like to chill the hearts of his friends if he continued to avoid slaying his enemies, Sir Lancelot sorrowfully promised that henceforth he would not stay his hand. After that he avoided none that came against him, though for very sorrow he could have wept when some knight, with whom in happier times he had drunk wine and jested at the board in Camelot, rushed at him with shrewd strokes to slay him.

As the fight went on, the lust of battle grew in Sir Lancelot's heart, and manfully he fought, and with all his strength and skill he lay about him. By the time of evensong his party stood very well, and the king's side seemed dispirited and as if they would avoid the fierce rushes with which Sir Lancelot's knights attacked them.

Staying his horse, Sir Lancelot looked over the field, and sorrowed to see how many dead there were—dead of whom many may have been slain by their own kindred. He saw how the horses of

his knights were splashed with the blood that lay in pools here and there, and grief was heavy upon him.

Sir Palom, a very valiant knight, came up to him.

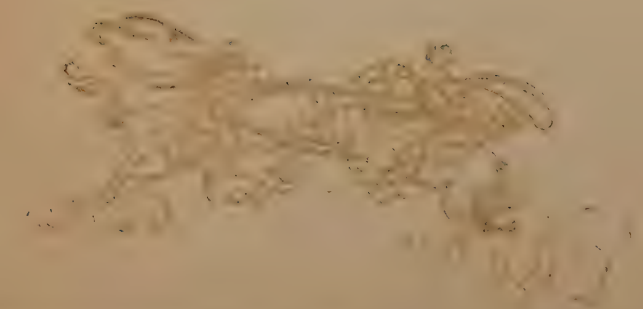
'See, lord,' he cried, 'how our foes flinch from the fierce hurtling of our knights. They are dispirited by the wounding of Sir Gawaine. Sir Kay is also wounded, and Sir Torre is slain. Now, if ye will take my advice, this day should cease this war once for all. Do ye gather all your forces, lord, and I think with one great dash together ye should scatter their wavering knights, and this field would be won.'

'Alas!' said Sir Lancelot, 'I would not have it so. It cuts me to my heart to war as I do against my lord Arthur, and to trample him and his people in the mire of defeat—nay, I should suffer remorse till my last day.'

'My lord,' said Sir Palom, 'I think ye are unwise. Ye spare them thus to come again against ye. They will give ye no thanks, and if they could get you and yours at so great a disadvantage, wit you well they would not spare you.'

But Sir Lancelot would not be moved, and in pity he ordered the trumpeters to sound the retreat. King Arthur did likewise, and each party retired in the twilight from the field, where the wounded lay groaning till death or succor came; and the dead lay still and pale, until the kindly earth was thrown over them.

Some weeks passed in which the armies did not



meet; for the host of King Arthur was not now so proud as they had been, seeing that they had lost many good knights; and Sir Lancelot would not of his own will sally out from his castle to fall upon the king.

But ever Sir Gawaine tried to inflame the mind of King Arthur and his kinsmen against Sir Lancelot, and he advised them to join battle with their enemy. Moreover, from the lands of his kingdom of Lothian, of which Sir Gawaine was now king in the place of his dead father, King Lot, a great body of young knights and men-at-arms came; and the king's party began to recover their courage.

Many began daily to ride to the walls of Joyous Gard, and by insult and evil names endeavored to tempt forth the men of Sir Lancelot. Soon the young knights clamored to King Arthur and Sir Gawaine to permit them to attack the walls, and reluctantly the king consented to call his council for next day to devise some means of breaking down the castle.

Headstrong was the counsel given by the young knights at that meeting, and greatly did King Arthur sorrow to feel that, for love of his nephew, Sir Gawaine, he would be compelled to yield to their wild demands for further battle.

Suddenly the door of the hall where sat the council was opened, and the porter of the gate appeared and approached the king.

'My lord,' he said, 'the holy Bishop of London

and King Geraint of Devon crave audience of you.'

The king's face brightened, and before any could advise him against his will, he said:

'Bid them enter instantly.'

'The meddling priest and the petty king that knoweth not his mind!' sneered Sir Gawaine, looking fiercely about the room. 'I pray thee, uncle,' he said to the king, 'listen not to their womanish persuasions, if thou lovest me.'

King Arthur did not answer, but looked towards the door impatiently.

Through this there came first three priests and three armed men, and behind them stepped an old and reverend man, the hair beside his tonsure white as driven snow, and falling over his white robe edged with red, that showed his rank as bishop. Then, towering above him, a noble, knightly figure, came Geraint of Devon, grown nobler still since those noble days when he had proved himself to be a strong leader indeed, while men had thought him soft and foolish.

All rose to their feet in reverence to the bishop, and fondly did King Arthur welcome Geraint, for this wise knight had from the first opposed Sir Gawaine in this war, and had refused to fight against Sir Lancelot and the queen, though he abated not his service to the king.

Dark was the look which Gawaine darted at Geraint, but quiet yet fearless was Geraint's answering gaze.

'What ye have to say,' said Gawaine angrily,

'say it quickly and begone. If ye are still of two minds, there seems no need to speak, and there is no need to bring a bishop to your aid.'

'Gawaine,' said King Geraint, and his voice was quiet, yet with a ring of menace in it, 'I think grief hath made you a little mad. Let the bishop speak, I pray ye. He hath a message for the king.'

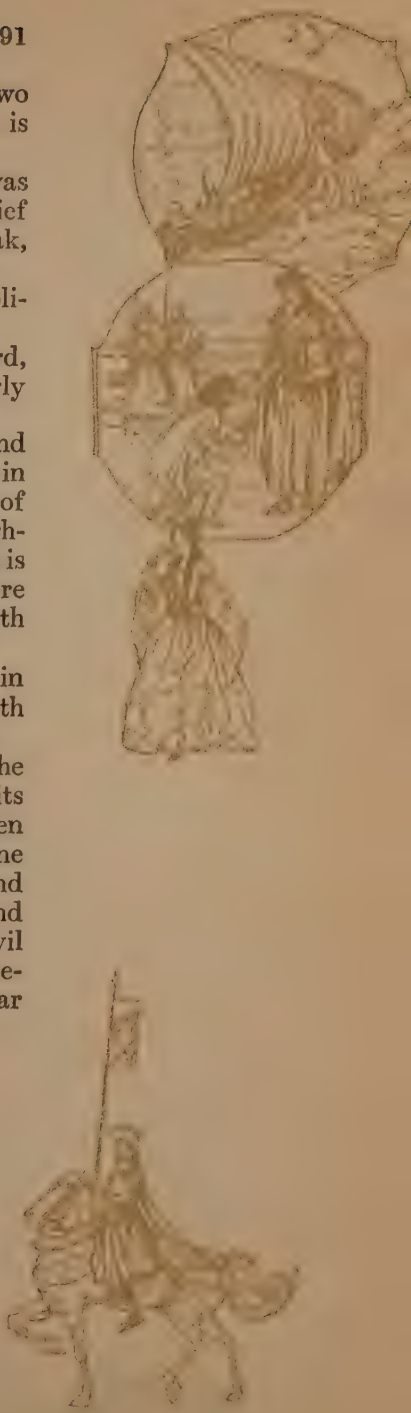
'My lord,' said the bishop, 'I come from his Holiness the Pope.'

At these words Sir Gawaine started forward, his hand upon his sword, as if he would willingly in his madness slay the holy priest.

'And,' went on the bishop, his grave voice and his quiet look not bating for all the wrathful fire in Sir Gawaine's eyes, 'I bear with me the bull of his Holiness—see, here it is—by which his Highness doth charge King Arthur of Britain, as he is a Christian king, to take back Queen Gwenevere unto his love and worship, and to make peace with Sir Lancelot.'

The murmurs of the wild young knights rose in a sudden storm, while Sir Gawaine glared with looks of hatred at King Geraint and the bishop.

'And if ye do not this command,' rang out the voice of the bishop (and there was sorrow in its tone, and silence sank on all), if ye do not, then will his Holiness excommunicate this land. None of ye here have seen so terrible a thing as a land laid under the interdict of the Holy Church, and rarely doth she find her children so stubbornly evil as to merit it. But the Father of the Church, seeing how this land is torn and rent by this bitter war



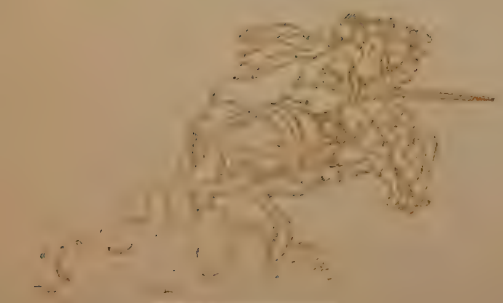
between brothers, and fearful lest, while ye tear at each other's lives, the fierce and evil pagan will gain upon ye and beat the lives from both of ye, and possess this fair island and drive Christ and His religion from it utterly—seeing all this, his Holiness would pronounce the doom if ye are too stiff-necked to obey him. Then will ye see this land lie as if a curse were upon it. Your churches will be shut, and the relics of the holy saints will be laid in ashes, the priests will not give prayers nor the Church its holy offices; and the dead shall lie uncoffined, for no prayers may be said over them. Say, then, King Arthur of Britain, what shall be the answer to the command of his Holiness which here I lay before thee.'

'Say, is this thy doing?' cried Sir Gawaine fiercely, looking at King Geraint. 'Didst thou send this meddling priest to Rome to get this?'

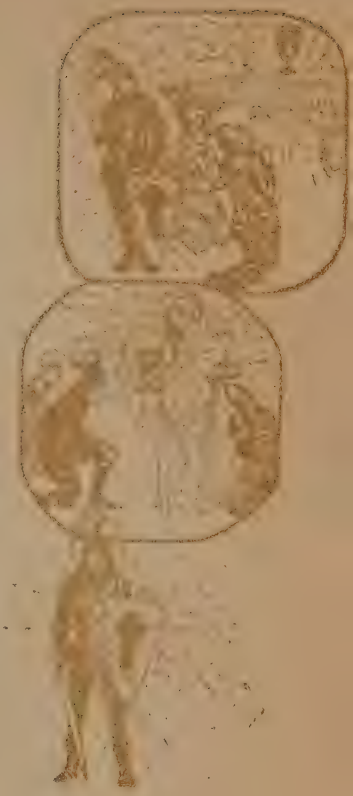
'That did I,' replied Geraint.

'Then now I make this vow,' thundered Sir Gawaine, 'that though thou hast balked me of my vengeance now, I will mark thee, thou king of two minds, and be thou sure that ere long I will avenge me of this treachery, and that upon thy body and in thy blood.'

'I mark thy words, Sir Gawaine,' said Geraint, whose eyes flashed fiercely, though his voice was calm, 'and I say again thou art mad. I will tell thee and the king, our lord and master, why I did advise the holy bishop to go to Rome and get the Pope's command. First, as ye all know, I did think this war a wicked one beyond all measure,



and ever have I raised my voice against it. And what I foresaw has come to pass. As the good priest saith, while ye tore at each other's throats here in the furthest marches of the north, the sly, fierce pagan, learning how all the land was rent and weakened by this evil war, has crept up in his longships, he has landed at many solitary places on the coast, and has spread far and wide throughout the land, burning and slaughtering. The long files of his captives, our kinsmen, go day by day, even as ye fight here, brother with brother, down to the black ships, and ye do naught to save them or avenge them. Already have I, in my office as Count of the Saxon Shore, battered them back to their ships at Lemanis, Llongporth and Rutupiæ; but here in the north, for all that the old lion, Uriens of Reged, worn with war and full of age, hath taken the field against them, here, behind your backs as ye battle, kin with kin, a great and a stubborn pagan, whom men call Hyring the Land-waster, hath entered the land and still prevails. Crafty he is and strong, for he hath made treaties with some of our weaker kin, and their women he hath taken in marriage for his leaders, and thus in our very midst there is treachery, hand-in-hand with the brutal invaders. Yet still you, Gawaine, are so mad, so lost to all care for your nation's weal, that you would see your people ruined and your land possessed by the savage boars of Saxons, while ye slake your vengeance for a private wrong. If still you so would do, I call you traitor, and, by the grace of God, I will make good

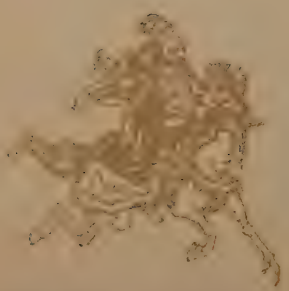


my words upon your body, when we have thrust the pagan from the land and peace is within our borders once again.'

While the thunder of his noble anger still rolled through the wide hall, King Arthur arose, and men marked the resolution in his eyes.

'I will that there be no more war,' he said, and he looked sternly at Gawaine. 'Geraint hath spoken the truth, and the truth shall prevail. I repent me that I have so long forgotten the needs of my kingdom. Do thou now, good bishop, go to Sir Lancelot, tell him that I will make peace with him and that I will receive back my queen. And do thou, good Geraint, fare south again. I thank thee from my heart for what thou hast done. Would to Heaven that all my knights were as clean-souled and as single-minded in devotion unto me as thou art. Do thou go and fulfill thy great office. Watch thou the coasts as hitherto thou hast watched them; and soon I will follow to aid thee, should the foul and savage pagans strive again to break into my realm.'

But, after all, Sir Gawaine had his way in part. The bishop took the king's assurance, sealed with his great seal, whereby he promised Sir Lancelot that he should come and go safe from murder or sudden onset, and desiring him to bring the queen to the king at his hall at Carlisle. But in that parchment was no word of reconciliation with Sir Lancelot. Sir Gawaine fiercely told the king that the day on which he, the king, should clasp the hand of Lancelot in friendship, he, Sir Gawaine,



with all his vassals and his men, would leave the kingdom. So deep and burning was the hatred which Gawaine bore Sir Lancelot that he even threatened that, if his will was not granted, he would join the pagans and fight against the king.

So shamed and saddened was the king at these words that, to put an end to his nephew's rage, he consented to do as he desired. Therefore, though the bishop strove to persuade the king to make his peace with Sir Lancelot, Sir Gawaine's will was done, and the bishop went sadly to Joyous Gard.

He showed his writings to Sir Lancelot and the queen, and both were sorrowful in that no word of reconciliation was said.

'I will do my lord's desire,' said the knight, 'but I see that Sir Gawaine's hatred of me is in no way abated. Nevertheless, do thou ride, my lord bishop, to the king. Commend me unto his good grace, and say to him that in five days I will myself bring my lady, Queen Gwenevere, unto him as he doth desire.'

On the day appointed, as the king sat in hall at Carlisle, surrounded by his knights and their ladies, with Sir Gawaine standing on the high seat beside him, there came the beat of many hoofs, and into the town rode Sir Lancelot with the queen, knights and squires accompanying them. They reined up at the wide door of the hall, and Sir Lancelot alighted, and having helped the queen to dismount, he took her hand, and led her through the ranks of knights and ladies to where sat King Arthur.

Sir Lancelot kneeled upon the edge of the dais, and the queen with him; and to see so noble a knight and so beautiful a lady, sad of countenance as they were, forced many a tear to the eyes of the knights and dames who looked on. Then, rising, and taking up the queen, Sir Lancelot spoke:

'My most redoubted lord,' he said, 'you shall understand that by the pope's commandment and yours I have brought unto you my lady your queen, as right requireth; and if there be any knight here, of any degree, who shall say that she or I have ever thought to plot treason against your person or your crown, or the peace of this realm, then do I say here and now that I, Lancelot du Lake, will make it good upon his body, that he lies. And, my gracious lord, if this is all that there is between you, my king, and myself, there need be naught of ill thought between us, but only peace and goodwill. But I wist well that one that hates me will not suffer ye to do what is in your good and kingly heart.'

Sternly did Sir Lancelot look at Sir Gawaine, while the tears gushed from King Arthur's eyes, and from the eyes of many that heard Sir Lancelot's sad words.

Fierce and dark was the look which Sir Gawaine returned to Sir Lancelot.

'The king may do as he will,' he said harshly and in a loud voice, 'but wit thou well, Sir Lancelot, thou and I shall never be at peace till one of us be slain; for thou didst slay my twain brothers,

though they bore no harness against thee nor any ill will. Yet traitorously thou didst slay them!'

'Alas, my lord,' said Sir Lancelot, and the tears bedewed his face, 'I cannot ask you for your forgiveness for that deed, unwitting though it was done and in my madness. Would to Heaven they had worn harness! Wit you well that ever will I bewail the death of my dear friend, Sir Gareth. 'Twas I that made him knight, and ever did I delight to see him, to hear his manly laugh ring out, and to see the light in his brave eyes that never suffered a mean or evil action. I wot he loved me above all other knights, and there was none of my kinsmen that I loved so much as I loved him. Ever will the sorrow of the death of thy brethren lie upon my soul; and to make some small amends I will, if my lord will suffer it and it will please you, Sir Gawaine, I will walk in my shirt and barefoot from Lemanis even unto this town, and at every ten miles I will found a holy house, and endow it with monks to pray for the souls of Sir Gareth and Sir Gaheris. Surely, Sir Gawaine, that will do more good unto their souls than that my most noble lord and you should war on me.'

Every cheek was wet and the tears of the king fell from his eyes, yet made he no effort to restrain or hide them.

'Out upon such monkish deeds!' cried Sir Gawaine, and his scornful eyes surveyed the weeping knights and dames. 'Know thee, once for all, that never shalt thou wipe away the treacherous murder of my brothers but by thy blood. Ye are safe now

for a season, for the pope hath given you safety, but in this land—whatever comes of it I care not—thou shalt not abide above fifteen days, or else I shall have thy head. So make ye no more ado; but deliver the queen from thee, and get thee quickly out of this court and out of this realm.'

'Well,' said Sir Lancelot, and laughed grimly, 'if I had known I should have so short an answer to my proffers of peace, I had thought twice ere I had come hither. But now, madam,' he said, turning to the weeping queen beside him, 'I must say farewell to ye, for now do I depart from this noble fellowship and this dear realm for ever. Pray for me, and send me word if any lying tongue speak evil of you, and if any knight's hand may deliver you by battle, believe me mine shall so deliver you.'

With these words Sir Lancelot bent and kissed the queen's hand, and so turned away and departed. There was neither king, baron, knight nor squire of all that great company who did not weep, nor think that Sir Gawaine had been of most evil mind to refuse the noble proffers of Sir Lancelot.

Heavy was King Arthur ever thereafter, and never might man see his face brighten nor hear his laugh; and the better of his knights sorrowed with him, and knew what was in his heart.

'In this realm will be no more quiet,' said Sir Owen of the Fountain to his fellows as they stood upon the walls of Carlisle and saw the band of Sir Lancelot riding southwards, the sunlight flashing from their helms and armor. 'The pagans have gathered strength daily while we have fought with

each other, and that which would have given us strength and the union which would hurl them from our coasts is shattered and broken. By the noble fellowship of the Round Table was King Arthur and his realm borne up, and by their nobleness the king and all his realm was in quietness and in peace. And a great part,' he ended, 'was because of the noble nature of Sir Lancelot, whom Sir Gawaine's mad rage hath driven from the kingdom. Nor is all the evil ended yet.'

CHAPTER VII

OF THE REBELLION OF MORDRED AND THE DEATH OF KING ARTHUR

When Sir Lancelot and all his men had left the realm of Britain and had betaken themselves to Brittany, where Sir Lancelot had a kingdom of his own, the Saxons began to increase in Britain, both in strength and numbers. Almost daily a long black ship, crammed with pagans, was sighted from some part of the coast; and the British, praying that the fierce pirates would not visit their homes, would watch the terrible warship till it passed; or caught unawares, would have to flee inland in a breathless panic when the dragon-headed prow loomed through the sea-mist, and the barbarous warriors swarmed over the sides and ran knee-deep in the water, their eyes gleaming with the joy of killing and their hands eager for the looting.

Then King Arthur made ready a great host, and for two years he fought in the northern parts against the bands of the pirates. Swift were the blows he struck, for the great wide Roman roads were still open, not grass-grown and deserted, and with his mounted knights and men he could ride

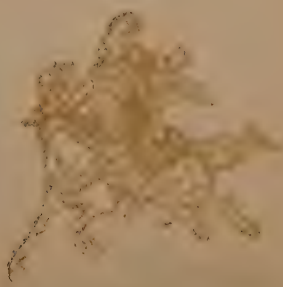
quickly from place to place, striking fiercely and scattering the foul pagans.

Ten was the number of these battles which he fought in the north, six against the Saxon pirates and four against the wildcats of Caledonia, whom men call Picts and Scots, and who had ventured south in greater numbers as soon as they heard how the king warred with his lords and the rich land was open to plunder. Two others he fought in the south, one against an insolent band of pirates who dared even to attack his palace-city of Caerleon-upon-Usk. But so heavy and deadly a blow did he strike at them then that from that battle barely a dozen pagans were left to flee like fire to their ships.

Not without loss of many of his brave warriors did Arthur win these battles, for the pagans were good men of their hands and not easily were they beaten. Saddest of all was the loss of the noble Geraint, who, thrusting back the pirates once again from the harbor of Llongporth, got his death there with many of his valiant men.

When the fame of King Arthur's prowess and the might of his knights had gone abroad among the pagans, they were afraid and would not venture in great numbers to invade the land again, and there was peace and rest in Britain for a space.

Then Sir Gawaine, remembering his hatred of Sir Lancelot, persuaded the king to make him ready another host, with which to invade the land of Brittany where Sir Lancelot ruled his kingdom. For a long time the king would not listen to his



advice, and the queen, with all her power, strove against Sir Gawaine. But that knight and his large following of knights and men-at-arms had been of great service in the recent wars against the pagans, and the king could not wholly refuse to listen to Sir Gawaine's demands.

Also Sir Mordred added his words to those of his brother, and said that men who came from Brittany said that Sir Lancelot was getting him ready a large army, and training many men, although he was at peace with his neighbors in Gaul. But the rumor went, as Sir Mordred reported, that Sir Lancelot was only waiting his time, and when King Arthur should be more than usually pressed by his pagan foes, Sir Lancelot and his great host would sail swiftly across the sea and seize the kingdom of Britain, when Arthur, exhausted by war, would be unable to withstand the fresh warriors of Sir Lancelot, and would lose both his queen and his crown.

For a time the king would not suffer these evil rumors to be mentioned in his presence, but many of his counselors thought there was much truth in them. At length, so persistent was Sir Mordred and those whom he craftily persuaded to believe him, that for sheer weariness the king consented to take an army across to Brittany, and to demand that Sir Lancelot should own that the king was his overlord, and that he should do homage to King Arthur for his kingdom.

The host was prepared, therefore, and at a meeting of his council King Arthur made his nephew,

Sir Mordred, Regent of Britain, to rule in the king's place while he should be abroad; and Queen Gwenevere he placed under the governance of Sir Mordred, as well as the officers of the court.

When they had passed the sea and landed in the coasts of Sir Lancelot's country, Sir Gawaine ordered his knights to go through the nearer parts, burning the houses of the people and wasting their lands. This he did in order to enrage Sir Lancelot against the king, so that he would not listen quietly to any demand which the king might make of him.

Word was brought to Sir Lancelot of the landing of King Arthur and the plundering and wasting of the land, but for some days he would do naught; for he was loath to take up arms against the king he loved, who had made him a knight.

At length Sir Bors came to him, and with that knight were others, as Sir Lunel of the Brake, Sir Magus of Pol, and Sir Alan of the Stones with his six mighty brothers.

'My lord, Sir Lancelot,' said Sir Bors, 'it is great shame that we suffer them to ride over our lands, burning the homes of our folk and destroying the crops in the fields.'

Sir Alan also, who with his brothers were seven as noble knights as a man might seek in seven lands ere he might find a brotherhood as valiant and withal as courteous, spoke to the like purport, saying:

'Sir Lancelot, for the love of our land, let us ride out and meet these invaders in the field, for we

have never been wont to cower in castles nor in towns.'

Then spoke Sir Lancelot, who was lord of them all.

'My fair lords,' he said, 'ye wit well that I am loath to raise my hand against my own dear lord and to shed the blood of Christian men. Yet I understand how it chafes you to stand by and see your fair land ruined by those that hate me. Therefore I will send a messenger to my lord Arthur, desiring him to make treaty with me. Then when we have his reply, we will consider the matter further.'

A damsel was therefore sent to the camp of King Arthur, and she bore a message from Sir Lancelot. She was brought to Sir Lucan, who was the king's butler, and she told him whence she had come and why.

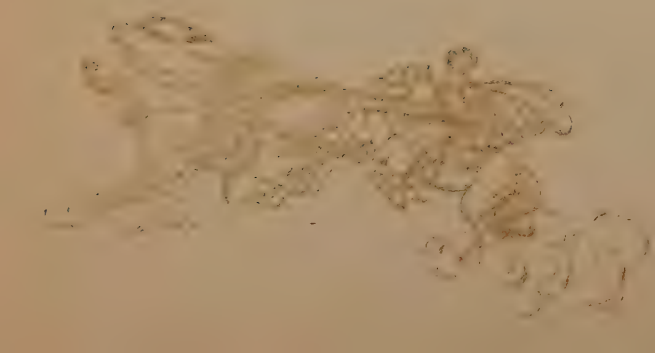
'Alas!' said Sir Lucan, 'I fear ye have made your journey in vain, fair damsel. My lord, King Arthur, would quickly accord with Sir Lancelot, whom he loves, but Sir Gawaine will not suffer him.'

Just then Sir Gawaine happened to pass by, and saw the maiden, and knew that she was not one of their party. He turned towards her, and his fierce eyes looked at her, grimly sour.

'Whence come ye?' he said harshly.

'I come hither to speak with King Arthur,' said the maiden, 'for I bear a message from my lord, Sir Lancelot.'

With an angry gesture Sir Gawaine seized her



bridle and led her palfrey swiftly to the edge of the camp.

'Depart!' he cried harshly, 'and tell your master that it is idle for him to send to mine uncle. Tell him from me, Sir Gawaine, that by the vow of my knighthood, I will never leave this land till I or he be slain. Now go!'

When this message was told to Sir Lancelot, the tears stood in his eyes and he went apart, and for that day the knights his comrades held their counsel. But they resolved that next day they would prevail upon Sir Lancelot to issue forth and give battle.

But in the morning, when they looked from the walls of the castle, they saw that Sir Gawaine had crept up in the dawn, and now was the place besieged. Thereupon there was fierce fighting, for Sir Gawaine caused ladders to be reared, and his knights strove to climb over the wall, but were mightily beaten back by Sir Lancelot's party.

Then the attackers drew off for a space, and Sir Gawaine, well armed, came before the chief gate, upon a stout steed. He shook his lance at the men over the gate, and cried:

'Where art thou, false traitor, Sir Lancelot? Why dost thou hide thyself within holes and walls like a coward? Look out now, thou timid soul, for when I may get at thee I will revenge upon thy evil body the death of my brothers twain.'

These shameful words were heard by Sir Lancelot, and all his knights and kin that stood about him, and they said:

'Sir Lancelot, now ye must be done with thy courtesy and go forth and beat back those evil words upon his foul mouth.'

'It is even so,' said Sir Lancelot; 'but sorry I am

Sir Gawaine, seated upon his horse below, laughed grimly, and cried upon the other.

and heavy of spirit thus to fight with him, who hath been my dear brother-in-arms so long, and whose brothers I did unwittingly slay. And much evil shall come of this.'

Then he commanded his strongest horse to be

saddled, and bade his armor to be dressed upon him, and when he was fully armed he stood at the top of the gate and cried upon the king.

'My lord Arthur,' he said, 'you that made me knight, wit you well that I am right heavy that ever ye do pursue me thus; but now that Sir Gawaine hath used villainous words about me, I must needs defend myself.'

Sir Gawaine, seated upon his horse below, laughed grimly, and cried upon the other.

'O Lancelot, Lancelot,' he said, 'what a man of words thou art! If thou darest to battle with me, cease thy babbling, man, and come off, and let us ease our hearts with strong blows.'

Then Sir Lancelot issued forth with many of his knights, and a covenant was made between the hosts that there should be no fighting until Sir Gawaine and Sir Lancelot had fought together, and one was either dead or had yielded.

Thereupon the two knights departed some way and then came together with all the might of their horses, and each smote the other in the midst of the shield. So strong were the knights and stout and big the spears that their horses could not stand the shock, and so fell to the ground. Then the knights quickly avoided their horses and dressed their shields, and fought fiercely together with their swords. So valiantly did each give and receive blows, and so heavy and grim was their fighting that all the knights and lords that stood thereabout marveled thereat and were fain to say, in as many

good words, that never had they seen such sword-play.

In a little while, so shrewd and skillful were they, both were wounded and the blood oozed from the joints of their armor, and it was great marvel to see that they could still stand, dashing their shields upon each other, and each beating upon the other with great slashes of their swords.

And which was the stronger of the twain none might say.

Now Sir Gawaine had a magic power, which had been endowed upon him at his birth by a great witch who was a friend of his mother, the sorceress, Queen Morgan le Fay, wife of King Lot. No one knew of this secret power except King Arthur, and often had it availed Sir Gawaine, so that in dire perils of onfall, sudden ambush, or long battle, it had given him the victory when all about him had been slain or wounded or taken captive.

The magic was that from the hour of nine until high noon the strength of his body increased until it was three times his natural strength, which itself was full great, though in that, for deep wind and breath and might of arm, Sir Lancelot was the stronger.

Now while they fought together, Sir Lancelot felt that Sir Gawaine seemed not to weaken as time went on, and he marveled greatly. Then he felt that indeed Sir Gawaine's strength was greater than it had been at the beginning, and a fear came into his heart that Sir Gawaine was possessed of a demon.

But Sir Lancelot was stout of heart as well as old in warcraft, and knew that if he could tire Sir Gawaine he might, by one blow, get the better of him when he saw a good chance. Therefore Sir Lancelot began to husband his strength, and instead of spending it in feinting and attacking, he bore his shield ever before him, covering himself from the fierce blows of his enemy.

Thus he kept up his own strength; but hard put to it was he when, towards midday, Sir Gawaine seemed to have the might of a very giant, and the shield arm of Sir Lancelot was numbed by reason of the crashing blows which Sir Gawaine's sword rained upon it.

Great travail indeed had Sir Lancelot to stand up and not to yield; and while men marveled how he could endure, none knew all he suffered.

Then, as the bell of the convent in the town boomed forth the hour of noon, Sir Gawaine heaved up his sword for a final blow; but his sword descended just as the last stroke of twelve had died away, and Sir Lancelot marveled to feel that what should have been so grievous a blow that, belike, he could not have stood before it, fell upon his shield with no more than the strength of the blow given by an ordinary man.

When Sir Lancelot felt the might of Sir Gawaine so suddenly give way, he drew himself up to his full height and said:

'Sir Gawaine, I know not by what evil power ye have fought, but now I feel that ye have done. Now, my lord, Sir Gawaine, I must do my part,

for none may know the great and grievous strokes I have endured this day with great pain.'

With that Sir Lancelot redoubled his blows, and the sword of Sir Gawaine gave before the might of Sir Lancelot, and his shield was rent. Then Sir Lancelot gave so great a buffet on the helm of the other that Sir Gawaine staggered, and with yet another blow Sir Lancelot hurled him headlong to the ground.

Men held their breath, for now, after so fierce and stubborn a struggle, they felt sure that Sir Lancelot, hot and enraged against his enemy, would rip off the other's helm and strike his head off instantly.

But, instead, Sir Lancelot stood for a moment looking at his prostrate enemy. Then men gasped to see him thrust his sword into its scabbard with a clang, turn on his heel and begin to walk away.

They saw the prone knight raise his head and look as if in surprise at the retreating figure of Sir Lancelot.

'Why dost thou depart?' cried Sir Gawaine, rage in his mocking voice. 'Turn again, false knight, and slay me! If ye leave me thus, thou shalt gain nothing from it, for when I am whole I will slay thee when I may.'

Men marveled to hear a fallen foe use such shameful and hateful words, but they marveled much more when Sir Lancelot, turning, cried:

'I shall endure you, sir, if God give me grace; but wit you well, Sir Gawaine, I will never smite you to death.'

Many that before had hated Sir Lancelot were moved by these noble words, and by the sight of his mercy; and they deemed that there was hardly another man in all Christendom that would have shown such nobility, save Sir Galahad and Sir Perceval, and they were dead.

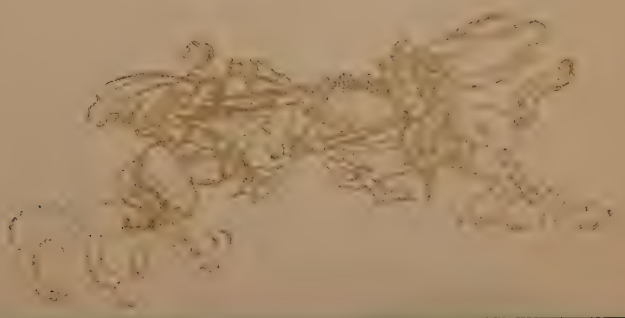
So Sir Lancelot went into the city, and Sir Gawaine was borne into King Arthur's tent and his wounds were cleaned and salved. Thus he lay for three weeks, hard of mood and bitter in his hatred, and longing eagerly to get well so he might try again to slay Sir Lancelot. Meanwhile he prayed the king to attack Sir Lancelot's walls, to try to draw him forth, or to take the city by treachery.

But the king would do naught. He was sick for sorrow because of the war that was between him and Sir Lancelot, and by reason of the wounds of his nephew Sir Gawaine.

'Alas,' was ever his reply, 'neither you nor I, my nephew, will win worship at these walls. For we make war for no reason, with as noble a knight as ever drew breath, and one more merciful and courteous than any that ever graced the court of any Christian king.'

'Nevertheless,' replied Sir Gawaine, raging at the king's love for Sir Lancelot, 'neither his mercy nor courtesy would avail against my good sword, once I could sink it in his treacherous heart.'

As soon as Sir Gawaine might walk and ride, he armed him at all points and mounted a great courser, and with a long wide spear in his hand he went spurring to the great gate of the town.



'Where art thou, Lancelot?' he cried in a fierce voice. 'Come thou forth, traitor knight and recreant! I am here to revenge me on thy evil body for thy treacherous slaughter of my twain brothers.'

All this language Sir Lancelot heard, and leaning from the tower he thus spake:

'Sir Gawaine, it sorrows me that ye will not cease your foul speaking. I know your might, and all that ye may do, and well ye wot ye may do me great hurt or death.'

'Come down, then,' cried Sir Gawaine, 'for what my heart craves is to slay thee. Thou didst get the better of me the other day, and I come this day to get my revenge. And wit thee well I will lay thee as low as thou didst lay me.'

'I will not keep ye waiting long,' said Sir Lancelot, 'for as ye charge me of treachery ye shall have your hands full of me ere long, however the battle between us may end.'

Then happened it even as before. The knights encountered first with spears, but Sir Gawaine's broke into a hundred pieces on the shield of Sir Lancelot. Then, dismounting, the knights fought on foot with swords.

Sir Gawaine put forth all his strength, hoping, with the magic power which he possessed, to dash Sir Lancelot to his knees. But Sir Lancelot was more wary than before, and under cover of his shield he husbanded his strength until the hour of noon, when, as before, he felt that Sir Gawaine's might had strangely ebbed away.

When that had come to pass, Sir Lancelot said:

'Now once more have I proved that ye fight not with a man's fair strength, Sir Gawaine, but with some evil power. And full grievously was I put to it to withstand many of thy sad blows. Now ye have done your great deeds, and I will do mine.'

Then with one stroke, of so marvelous a force that men marveled, Sir Lancelot beat down Sir Gawaine's guard, and struck him a full heavy blow on the side of the helm, beating it in so that the old wound burst again.

Sir Gawaine fell to the ground, and for some moments lay still as if he were dead or in a swoon; but he was only dazed, and soon recovering, he raved and foamed as he lay there, cursing Sir Lancelot for a traitorous coward and a base knight, and even, in his madness, thrusting towards him with his sword.

'Wit thou well, base knight,' he cried, 'that I am not slain yet. Come thou near and lie here with me, and we will fight this battle until we die.'

'I will do no more than I have done, my lord,' said Sir Lancelot, 'and when thou art able to stand I will meet thee again. But to smite a wounded man that may not stand, I will not.'

Then Sir Lancelot withdrew to the town, while Sir Gawaine still raved and abused him, and men marveled both at the exceeding madness of the hatred of Sir Gawaine and the great restraint and nobleness of Lancelot. Many said that had Sir Gawaine said half as many shameful things to one of them, they would have instantly rased his evil head from his shoulders.

For a month Sir Gawaine lay sick, but was always eager to be up and able again. And at length the leech said that in three days he should ride, whereat Sir Gawaine was joyful.

'Again,' said he to King Arthur, who sat beside him, 'again shall I have to do with that base fellow, and ill attend me if I do not end the matter this time.'

'Ye had ended it long ago, or been ended,' said the king, 'except for the nobleness of Sir Lancelot that forbore to slay you.'

'Ay, we all know your love of the pestilent fool, uncle,' said Sir Gawaine, 'but we will stay here until we have made an end of him and his kingdom, if it take us all our lives.'

Even as he spoke there came the clear call of a trumpet outside in the camp, and Sir Bedevere came to the door of the king's tent, his grim old face pale, his grizzled hair unkempt, and every sign of haste and travel upon his dress.

The king started up. 'Sir Bedevere, ye bring evil tidings from Britain,' he cried. 'Can it be that more ruin and wrong is to come than that I suffer now? What is your news?'

'O my king, it is that Mordred your nephew hath rebelled,' said Sir Bedevere, 'and hath gathered much people about him, and hath sent many letters to all the lords and knights your vassals, promising them wealth and land if they make him king. And Gwenevere your queen he hath imprisoned, saying that he will wed her when ye are slain.'

'Mordred! Mordred!' cried the king, 'him that I thought was a quiet, strong man—turned so base a traitor!'

'Ay, he was ever the traitor, though brother of mine,' cried Sir Gawaine in a voice of rage. 'A man that speaks in whispers, haunts dark corners, and ever sneers with his lips.'

'Hardly with my life have I escaped to tell you this,' went on Sir Bedevere, 'for he placed men to watch me after I had scorned his evil offers to myself. But now, my lord, quickly ye must betake yourself and all your army from this fruitless and wrongful war against Sir Lancelot, and hasten to beat down the poisonous viper whom ye have nourished in your bosom.'

Ere the day was done the army of King Arthur had raised the siege of Sir Lancelot's town and were quickly marching to the sea, there to take their boats across to Britain to punish the usurper and traitor, Sir Mordred.

A fair wind carried them across the sea, but long ere they reached the shallows of the beach at Dover they saw the sunlight flashing from thousands of head-pieces of knights and men-at-arms, set to oppose the landing of their rightful lord. The king was fiercely angry, and he commanded the masters of the ships to launch their small boats, and into these the knights swarmed and were rowed towards the shore.

But the rebels of Mordred also launched boats and great pinnaces filled with knights, and when the boats of the opposite parties met, then there

was fierce fighting and much slaughter of many good knights and barons and other brave men. Then King Arthur and his chief knights drew forth their horses from the holds of the ships, and leaped with them into the sea, and fiercely did they throw themselves upon Sir Mordred and his knights, and there was grievous fighting on horseback in the shallow water, which soon was dyed with the blood of the slain.

So stubborn were the king and his fighting men that the army of Mordred was forced to retreat towards the land, and then, when the king and Gawaine had trimmed their own ranks, order was given for one concerted rush against the enemy. The other side showed little fight now, and made no stand, but fled inland.

When the battle was over, King Arthur let bury his people that were dead, so far as they could be discovered in the waves; and the wounded he caused to be carried into the town of Dover to be cared for.

A squire came to the king as he stood giving orders as to these things.

'My lord king,' said the squire, 'Sir Gawaine lies sore wounded in a boat, and we know not whether he be alive or dead.'

'Alas!' cried the king, and the knights about him were full of pity at the sudden grief that came into his voice and his looks, 'is this true? Then is all my joy of life at an end.'

The squire led him to the boat in which Sir Ga-

waine lay, who stirred as the king approached, and feebly smiled.

'My uncle,' said Sir Gawaine, 'wit you well that now is my death-day come, for I know I shall not last this bout. For I am smitten upon the wound which Sir Lancelot gave me, and I feel that now I shall die.'

'Alas, my sister's son,' cried the king, taking Sir Gawaine in his arms and kissing him, while the tears flowed down his cheeks, 'this is the woefulest day of all my life. For if ye depart, Gawaine, how solitary am I! Gawaine! Gawaine! in Sir Lancelot and in thee had I most my love and my joy, and now shall I lose ye both, and all my earthly joy is gone from me.'

'Alas,' said Sir Gawaine, 'sorrow's on me now that I have caused you such grief, mine uncle. I see now that I have been mad with rage against that noble knight, Sir Lancelot, who slew my dear brothers unwittingly. And now I repent me sorely. I would that I could live to repair the evil that I have done to you and to Sir Lancelot. But my time is come. I shall not live till evening.'

They wept together, and the knights that stood about them also wept for pure grief, to think how much sorrow and ruin was caused by the mad rage of Sir Gawaine, which had pushed the good king on to make war against his will.

'I am the causer of this rebellion by my traitor brother,' said Sir Gawaine, 'and my name shall be cursed for it. Had I not wilfully driven thee, thou wouldst have accorded with Sir Lancelot, and he

and his brave kinsmen would have held your cankered enemies in subjection, or else cut them utterly away. Lift me up, my lord, and let me have a scribe, for I will send a letter to Sir Lancelot ere I die.'

Then Sir Gawaine was set up by the king, and a priest was brought, who wrote at the dying man's dictation. And the purport of the letter was in this wise:

'Unto Sir Lancelot, flower of all noble knights that ever I heard of or saw, and once my dear friend, now do I, Sir Gawaine, King Lot's son of Orkney and the Lothians, and sister's son to King Arthur, send thee greeting and let thee know by these writings that I am this day done to death, having been wounded at the landing against rebellious traitors, and struck upon the wound which thou didst give me twice, before thy city. Whereby I have got my death. But I will have thee to wit that I sought my death of thee, and got that wound deservedly of thee, who could have slain me twice, but for thy high nobility and great courtesy. I, Gawaine, beseech of thee forgiveness for my madness, and crave that thou wilt remember the dear friendly days we have had together in times long past, and for all the love that was between us. Come thou over the sea, and with thy knights do thou press to the help of Arthur, our noble lord, who is beset by a traitorous villain, my brother Mordred, who hath dared to rebel against his rightful lord, and hath crowned himself king. Do thou hasten, good Sir Lancelot, when thou shalt receive

this letter, and follow the king. But ere thou goest from this seashore do thou come to my tomb, and pray some prayer more or less for my sinful soul, that in its madness did evilly entreat thee.'

Then was Sir Gawaine shriven, and in a little while he swooned, while all stood uncovered round about him. When the rays of the afternoon sun cast long shadows of the knights and fighting men who were hurrying up and down the shore making ready to depart, Sir Gawaine awoke from his swoon and looked up. For a moment he did not recognize King Arthur; then he smiled at him very sweetly and said in a low voice:

'Kiss me—and forgive me!'

The king knelt down and kissed the pallid face of Sir Gawaine, and for very sorrow he felt that the heart in his breast was nigh to bursting.

So in a little while, with the beat of the surf and the cry of the seagulls upon his ears, the light of the sun in his eyes, and the free air of heaven all about him, Sir Gawaine died. And his death was as he had ever craved it to be, under the open sky, after battle, where he had given good strokes and received them.

Now the letter which Sir Gawaine had written was given unto a young squire of Sir Gawaine's, by name Tewder, and he was commanded to depart forthwith back to Brittany, and deliver it into the hands of Sir Lancelot. But among the knights that had stood about the dying Sir Gawaine was a traitor, who was in the service of Sir Mordred the rebel, and he knew that if Sir Lance-

lot should receive that letter, and come to Britain with all his brave kin and their host, Sir Mordred would have much ado to conquer King Arthur.

Therefore the traitor knight, whose name was Sir Fergus, did accost Tewder the squire, and with fair seeming told him that he also was bidden to go back to Brittany, to bring back certain jewels which the king in his hasty departure had left in his lodging at the town of Dol.

Tewder, unsuspecting of all evil, went aboard a boat with Sir Fergus, and together they bargained with the master to take them across when the tide should rise again at dark. Together they crossed the sea that night and took the road towards Sir Lancelot's town; and in a dark wood Sir Fergus set upon the squire, who fought bravely, but was slain at last, and the letter of Sir Gawaine was taken by the traitor.

Then, returning to the seashore, the wretch went aboard another boat, and chaffered with the merchant to take him across the sea to the town of Llongporth, whence he thought to get quickly to Mordred, to receive from him the reward of his treachery and murder. But at night, as they sailed over the dark sea, a fifty-oared longship, filled with Saxon pirates, crept upon them; the pagans poured over the side, slew men almost in their sleep, and flung their bodies overboard. And though Fergus fought well, his head was almost struck from his body by a great sheering axe-blow. When the pirates had taken all the goods they desired from the merchant vessel, they stove a hole

in its side, and it sank to the bottom of the sea. So that no man ever again saw the letter which was meant for Sir Lancelot.

For some weeks Sir Lancelot lay quiet, knowing naught of the death of Sir Gawaine or of the letter desiring him to go to the help of King Arthur. Many rumors came to him, through the ship-folk, of the wicked rebellion of Sir Mordred, and though Sir Lancelot longed to go across to Britain and fight for King Arthur, his kinsmen would not consent, but said it would be unseemly, unless the king craved his aid, and sued for pardon for making war against Sir Lancelot in his own country.

Thus the precious weeks went by, and much ill-fortune happened in Britain, that had ended otherwise if Sir Lancelot had been by the king.

Three days after the battle upon the shore, the king's host came up with the host of Sir Mordred in Barham down. Many folks had joined the rebels' side, because they hated the king for making war upon Sir Lancelot, and the king was sorely hurt in his mind to see a banner borne by one part of the usurper's army, on which was the device of Sir Lancelot's.

This the crafty Sir Mordred had commanded to be done, knowing that it would damp the spirits of King Arthur and his men.

'Verily,' said King Arthur, 'my evil deeds have sprung up as armed men against me. I fought unjustly with Sir Lancelot, and here are some that loved him arrayed against me for that wicked war.'

'If ye would send for Sir Lancelot,' said Sir

Owen of the Fountain, who stood by him, 'ye would learn, I verily believe, that Sir Lancelot loves and worships you as of old, and hath no mind to fight on the side of this sly fox, Mordred. Send for Sir Lancelot, lord.'

'Nay, I will not—I may not,' said the king. 'If he cometh by the words which Sir Gawaine wrote to him, I shall know that he loves me and forgives me; but if he cometh not, I shall know he hates me, and I shall merit his ill-favor. He owes naught to me since I used him so evilly, and therefore I may not ask his aid.'

All day the battle raged upon the great green down, and many were the fierce fights which took place upon the top thereof, where, behind great earthworks freshly timbered, the main hosts of Sir Mordred stood, the banner of the great red dragon in their midst.

But at the last, so fast and fierce did the blows of King Arthur's men fall, and so stubborn did they press on, that Sir Mordred's host gave way. Pouring forth by the upper gate, they ran pell-mell northwards, and the knights and fighting men of Arthur kept up with them for many miles, and there was a running fight and much wounding and slaying all through the fresh green country-side, where the hedges were laden with May blossoms, and in the sky the larks were trilling.

And that day many a wounded man crawled groaning into the thickets to die, many a chalky cart-rut ran red with blood, and many a white face, with wide-open, sightless eyes, stared up at

the blue sky, where the fleecy clouds sailed in the gentle wind.

For three weeks after this battle both sides rested, and like great wrestlers gathered all their strength for one great struggle. Knights and riders were sent by both sides into all parts, with letters to lords and knights, charging them to take their sides in the war. Many people from about London came to the banner of Mordred, and the parts now called Kent, Sussex and Surrey, Essex and Suffolk held wholly with him; but those in the west, as Wales, Devon, Cornwall and the middle parts, thronged to the banner of the king.

Few came from the north, for there the pagan pirates stalked with fire and sword through and through the land, and the British lords and chiefs that were alive had little power to stay them now. King Uriens was dead, slain by the dagger of a traitor, and so were two other great chieftains; so that men south of Trent sorrowfully shook their heads and said that now the north was no longer the land of the British folk, but was given over to the savage heathen hordes.

Then, to meet the many that flocked together in his favor, King Arthur drew with his host westward beyond Sarum. There on the wide downs beside the great standing-stones of the Old Princes, which men now called Stonehenge, a great multitude of chiefs and knights and yeomen came to his banner.

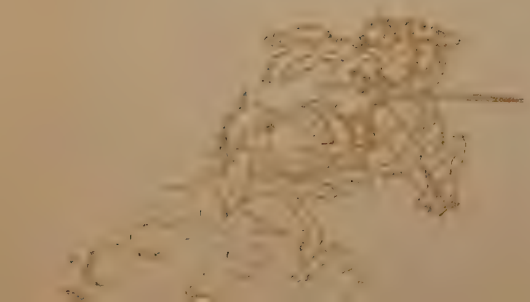
But Sir Mordred avoided a battle, and, instead, kept aloof with his army, and began to burn and

harry the country which was on the side of Arthur. He took Calleva and Cunetio, and put the people to the sword, and took much gear from those wealthy cities; then he stole through the great forest by night and came to Palladun, which was a rich town builded upon the top of a great hill. He thought to take this unawares, but it was well watched and well armed, and he strove to break into it and was kept about it for some days.

That delay was used well by King Arthur, for he made great haste to pass through the wild country, filled with wide marshes and thick woods as it was, which separated him from his enemy. Then Mordred, hearing through the spies of the king's approach, got his host away and thought to pass into the lands of Devon, which were those of King Dewer, son of the dead Geraint, and held firmly for Arthur.

But in the wild waste-land beside the Endless Waters, King Arthur caught up with him, and barred his further way. And the king remembered that this was that same land, full of gaunt standing-stones and haunted by trolls and witches, where Merlin had once led him, and where he had gained the sword Excalibur.

It was late in the day when the two armies faced each other, and both prepared to pass the night upon the field. Bitter was the wind that evening, and the skies were dun and leaden of hue, as if spring had been overcome by winter; and to shelter the king a tent had been put up in a little dark wood of stunted firs, called the Wood of Drood.



Just in the deep dark before the dawn, when the blood in men's veins was coldest, and the life in their hearts was weakest, a dreadful cry wailed out through the dark wood, and there came the sound as of leathery wings flapping heavily to and fro above where the king lay sleeping. Men started up about their ashen fires, their faces blanching at the terror that cried in the dark, and they heard the wailing twice repeated, while none dared try to see the thing that wailed.

Then, while their blood chilled and their breath stayed, they heard the heavy flapping pass over their heads and die away towards the camp of Mordred; and there in the distance did the three cries sound again.

Men's hearts sickened as they turned and crept the nearer to each other, but few dared to utter the words upon their lips.

Two knights slept in the tent with the king, Sir Kay and Sir Owen; and they lay in the dark, trembling at the cries of terrible import. When they passed, the knights would not move, fearing to be the first to speak.

'My lords,' came the quiet voice of King Arthur out of the dark, 'that was the voice of the Hag of Warning. Men say it hath foretold the deaths of many of my house, but I know not. Yet will I take the issue as God shall give it me, trusting in His mercy and the blood of His Son Jesus, and Him crucified.'

'Amen,' said the two knights, and said no more.

When, in a little while, the sun rose, flashing his

warm rays into the fearful eyes that greeted him, men's terror quickly vanished; and when fires were lit and oaten cakes were browning on the irons, or collops sputtered on the skewers, tongues were loosened and faces began to smile. But few spoke of the cries which they had heard, for all loved their king, and hoped that somehow they had dreamed an evil dream, or had but heard the cries of some foul night-bird.

Breakfast being ended, the captains and knights began to trim their men in army array, and talk was eager of the coming battle. Then were seen, coming from Sir Mordred's camp, two bishops; and these were taken at their desire to Arthur, where he stood surrounded by his knights and chieftains.

'Lord,' said one of the bishops, he that was head of the great choir or monastery of Amesbury, 'cannot we make accord between you and your nephew? Sad it is to see so many great and valiant warriors ranged against each other. Many are sisters' sons, and all are of one speech, one kindred. If this unnatural war doth continue, how much sorrow there will be, how many noble hearts be stilled in death or broken in grief for him that shall never return! How many puissant bodies, now quick and passionate and handsome, will be meat for snarling wolves and carrion for foul birds!'

'What says my rebellious nephew?' asked the king sternly.

'My lord,' said the other bishop, a man of soft and silky speech, and he was chief of the choir of

Clovesho, 'he asks but little, and if ye are willing to make treaty, he also is willing. Grant him but the earldom of Kent and the Andred, with a seat at London, during your days, and do thou appoint him king after your days. For now that Sir Gawaine, Sir Gaheris and Sir Gareth are slain, he is the only sister's son you have. If ye grant these things he will be your liege, faithful in all things, and a strong arm against your enemies.'

Then some of King Arthur's knights would have him agree to these terms, but others would not, and said the king should make no treaty with a traitor, but that Mordred should come and throw himself upon the mercy of his king and uncle.

At the last, after much counsel had been taken, King Arthur agreed to meet Mordred, with fourteen of his chief men, in the space betwixt their hosts, and the king should also take fourteen knights with him. So the bishops went back with this message, and King Arthur called the chieftains of his host about him.

'I go to see this traitor, my nephew,' he said to them, 'whether he means falsely or truly with this talk of a treaty. But look ye, I in no wise trust him. Hold ye your men warily, and if ye see any sword drawn among us where we stand, do thou sound the horns of attack and come on fiercely, and slay that rebel and all that hold with him.'

In like wise did Mordred warn his men, 'for,' said he, knowing how greatly he had sinned against his generous and noble uncle, 'I know well that

King Arthur and his knights would be avenged on me if they could.'

The party from each army went forward over the stony hillside, until they met midway between the armies, and men watched them keenly. King Arthur spoke chidingly to his nephew Mordred, who, sour and dark of face, looked craftily at the faces of his uncle and his knights. And the chiefs with Mordred, men for the most part of violent and ambitious natures, looked haughtily at King Arthur's party. Nevertheless there was no bad blood shown, and the talk was continued, and Mordred repeated the demands which the bishops had made.

'But I care not to give to thee Kent and London,' said the king. 'I tell thee frankly, Mordred, I would not trust thee there. I fear me thou wouldst try some crafty plot with the Saxon pagans if I gave them thee, as that rebel Caros did, who for a time made himself emperor of the Romans here in this land.'

'Ha' done, then, my father,' said Gorfalk, the son of Mordred, an insolent young man. 'Let us cease this. I doubt not we be big enough to get all the kingdom if we fight.'

The king looked sternly at the young man, and there was silence among them all as men waited for Arthur's reply.

Then it happened that a young chieftain, standing near the king, felt something bite his foot where the low leathern shoe left it naked. He looked down and saw that he was treading on a

viper, which had struck him and was about to strike again. With a cry the knight stepped aside, drew his sword, and cut the reptile in two.

As the blade flashed, silvery bright in the sunlight, a great hoarse cry rose like thunder from the two masses of men watching them on either side; trumpets blared and horns squealed, and shouts of command rose sharp and keen.

Instantly the men standing with Arthur and Mordred looked about them, saw where the young chieftain stood with drawn sword, and knew that now nothing could avert the battle.

'The gods will have it so!' sneered Mordred.

Already the earth trembled and shook with the beat of ten thousand feet of the armies rushing together. A knight of Mordred's, drawing his sword, thrust it into the breast of one of Arthur's chieftains, with the cry:

'This for thy land, Sir Digon, that marches with mine!'

Instantly others fell to fighting hand-to-hand, striking on targe and helm; but Sir Owen, Sir Kay and Sir Bedevere surrounded the king, and all hurried back to the army approaching them. So likewise did Sir Mordred.

Then came the crash of battle, as line on line, with flashing swords held high, the ranks of war closed. Blades rose again, stained red, fierce strangled cries came from men in the death-grips, helms were cracked, shields riven, dirks sank home, and men who once had drunk and jested with laughing looks over the same mead-board now met

fierce eye to eye, and never parted until one or both fell in the swaths of the death-harvest.

All day the stubborn battle raged, and ever the king sought out the rebel Mordred, but never reached him. Many valiant deeds he did, wielding his sword Excalibur; and by his side were Owen and Kay, Lucan and Bedevere. So spent were they at the last that hardly could they lift their swords, and so sick of the slaying were they that gladly would they have ceased. But ever some vicious band of Mordred's knights would come upon them, and then they quitted them like men, and ceased not till their enemies had fled or were slain.

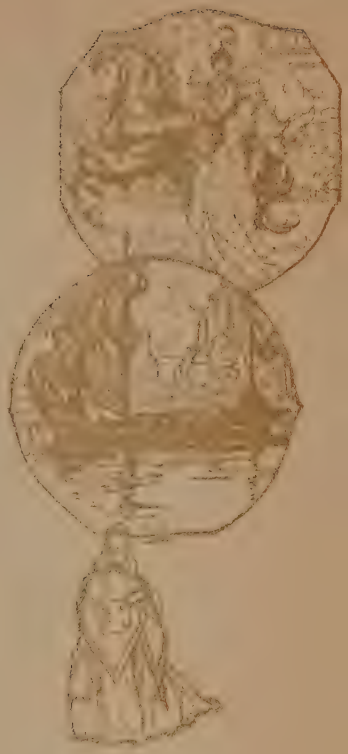
Suddenly the king came to himself, and, standing still, looked upon the field. In the morning it had been but a bare hillside of hungry, stunted grass, through which the stones showed gray and sallow, like ancient bones. Now, in the low light of the sinking orb, it was red—red, with the pallid faces of the dead stained a lighter red in the rays of the sun. Here and there bands still fought together, cries of fury rose, and the groans of the dying mingled with them.

'Alas!' cried the king, and looked behind him, 'where are all my noble knights?'

There were but two with him now, Lucan and his brother Bedevere.

'Where is Owen, and Kay?' he asked.

'Alas, lord,' said Bedevere, 'Sir Owen got his death-wound by the thorn where we fought those five knights but now, and Sir Kay suddenly fell as



he walked. And when I knelt to speak to him, I found him dead.'

'Alas,' said the king, 'that ever I should see this doleful day, for now is my end come. But would to Heaven that I wist where is that traitor Mordred, that hath caused all this sorrow and ruin.'

Then, as he spoke, he looked towards the east, and saw where, by a tall standing-stone, a man leaned as if spent with a wound. And he was aware that this was Mordred.

'Now give me my spear,' said the king to Sir Lucan, 'for yonder is the traitor, and he shall not escape me.'

'Lord,' said Sir Lucan in a weak voice, 'let him bide, for he hath none with him, while we three are still alive.'

'Now, betide me death, betide me life,' said the king, 'now that I see him yonder I will slay the serpent lest he live to work more havoc on this my poor kingdom.'

'God speed you well,' said Sir Bedevere, and gave the king his spear.

Then the king ran towards Sir Mordred, crying:

'Traitor, prepare, now is thy death-day come!'

When Sir Mordred heard King Arthur he raised his head, then came toward the king with his sword in his hand.

And there, in the shadow of the great stone, King Arthur smote Sir Mordred under the shield, with so keen a stroke of his spear that it went through the body and out beyond. Sir Mordred,

feeling that death was upon him, thrust himself along the spear almost to the butt thereof, nigh where King Arthur held it, and grasping his sword in both his hands, he struck his uncle on the side of the head, with so keen and fierce a blow that the sword pierced the helm and the skull.

With that stroke Sir Mordred fell stark dead to the earth, and the king sank in a swoon upon his body.

Then Sir Bedevere and Sir Lucan, who were both sore wounded and weakly, came up, and between them, with many rests upon the way, took the king to a little combe beside the waters, and there they took off his helm and bathed his wound and bound it. After which the king felt easier.

'We may do naught else with thee here, lord,' said Sir Lucan, 'and it were best that we got thee to some town.'

'It would be better so,' said the king, 'but I fear me I have my death-wound.'

When they had rested Sir Lucan tried to rise, so as to take up the king.

'I may not rise,' he cried, his hands upon his head, 'my brain works so.'

Nevertheless, the knight staggered to his feet and lifted up the feet of the king. But the effort was too much for him, and with a deathly groan he fell to the ground, and when he had twitched and struggled a little he lay dead.

'Alas,' said the king, 'this is to me a full heavy sight, to see this noble knight so die for my sake.

He would not complain, so set was he to help me, and now his heart has broken.'

Then Sir Bedevere went to his brother and kissed him, and closed his eyes.

'Now,' said the king, 'come hither to me, Bedevere, for my time goeth fast and I remember me of a promise. Therefore,' he bade Sir Bedevere, 'do thou take Excalibur, my good sword, and go with it beyond the combe side there where a low thorn grows, and when thou comest there, I charge thee, throw my sword in that water, and come again and tell me what thou seest.'

So Sir Bedevere departed with the sword, and on the way he looked at the sword, and saw how noble was the blade and how shining, and how the pommel and haft were full of precious stones.

'If I throw this sword into the water,' said Sir Bedevere to himself, 'how great a sin 'twould be to waste so noble a weapon.'

Therefore he hid it in the branches of the thorn and returned to the king.

'What sawest thou?' asked the king when Bedevere returned.

'Sir,' he said, 'I saw the wind beat on the waves.'

'Ye have not done as I bid thee,' said the king. 'Now, therefore, do thou go again and do as I bid thee; and as thou art dear to me, spare it not, but throw it in.'

Then Sir Bedevere went back and took the sword in his hand; but again he could not bring himself to throw away that noble sword, so again he hid the sword and went back to the king.

'What sawest thou this time?' said the king.

'Lord,' said Bedevere, 'I saw the waters ebb and flow and the sedges trembling.'

'Ah, traitor untrue!' said the king, deep sorrow in his voice, 'who would have weened that thou who hast been so true and dear to me, and who hast been named a noble knight, would betray me for the jewels on a sword? Now go ye again, I charge thee, and as thou shalt answer for thy sins at the last day, throw ye the sword far into the waters.'

Then in heavy mood Sir Bedevere went the third time, and took the sword from its hiding-place, and looking away from the weapon lest its beauty should soften him, he bound the girdle about the hilt, and then he threw the sword with all his might far out over the water.

As he looked, inwardly lamenting, he saw the jewels flash in the low light as the sword passed through the air. Then suddenly, when it neared the water, he marveled to see a great arm and hand come up through the waves. The hand caught the weapon by the haft, shook it and brandished it thrice, and then vanished with the sword under the waves.

With some fear in his heart Sir Bedevere went back to the king and told him all that he had seen.

'It is well,' said the king. 'Now have I performed my promise. Help me hence to some village, for I am cold and would die beneath a roof, if I may.'

Then Sir Bedevere took the king upon his back, thinking that he would find some road in a little

while which should lead them to a hamlet. And as he went along, he passed by the waterside, near

A great arm came up through the waves.

the low thorn whence he had thrown the sword into the water.

There, in the sedges, he marveled to see a barge draped all in black cloth, and in it sat many fair

ladies, all with black hoods on. When they saw Sir Bedevere with the king upon his back, they shrieked and wept.

And one that looked a queen, so fair and stately, yet so sad was she, held out her arms towards the king, and cried unto him in a voice wondrous sweet, 'Come to me, brother!'

'Put me into the barge,' said the king to Bedevere, 'for there I shall have rest.'

Softly did Sir Bedevere lay him in the barge, and the fair ladies wept over the king with much mourning, and one laid his head in her lap and caressed it with soft hands.

Then, without sails or oars, the barge went from the shore, and fear and sorrow shook the soul of Sir Bedevere to see them go from him.

'Alas, my lord Arthur,' he cried, 'what shall become of me if ye are leaving me lonely?'

'Comfort thyself,' said the king in a faint voice, 'and do as well as thou mayest, for in me ye may no longer trust. For I will go into the vale of Avalon to heal me of my grievous wound, and if thou hear never more of me, pray for my soul.'

Sir Bedevere stood watching till the barge went from his sight in the mists of evening, and then he wept a little, and so fared forward through the night, weeping as he thought how all the glory that was Arthur's was now past, and how he himself was very old and very lonely.

When morning broke he was aware of a little

chapel and a hermitage between two hoar woods upon a knoll beside the marshes, and entering therein he got cheer of the holy hermit and rested.

Now, when King Arthur had gone westwards to collect his host, Sir Owen, marveling that Sir Lancelot had sent no word in reply to the letter of Sir Gawaine, had charged a trusty squire of his to go across to Brittany, to tell Sir Lancelot of all that had passed and how King Arthur longed for his aid and his love. Nigh mad with grief was Sir Lancelot when he had learned all, and so deep was his sorrow and so wild was his regret that hardly could he wait till the ships were ready to take him and his knights and army across to Britain.

When they arrived at Dover, Sir Lancelot sought out the tomb of Sir Gawaine, and there with much weeping he prayed long and earnestly for the repose of the soul of that dead warrior, his once dear friend. All the other knights prayed likewise for the soul of Gawaine, and Sir Lancelot gave one hundred pounds for masses to be said, and the others gave according to their means.

Then word was brought him of the daylong dreadful battle in the west, and how King Arthur was gone, mortally wounded, none knew whither, and how all the knights of the Round Table were dead.

Silent was Sir Lancelot at this news, but men saw how his stern face paled; and for a time he walked apart and would suffer none to speak to

him. Then he came to his knights, and all could see how his looks had changed. Grief was deeply lined upon his face, and he had the air of an aged and weary man.

'My fair lords,' he said, 'I thank you all for your coming with me, but we came too late. But now I go alone to find the body of my dear lord, and if I may, I will see my lady, Queen Gwenevere. And do ye all go back into your country, for now we have no place in this.'

Thus Sir Lancelot fared forth, and would suffer none to go with him. First he went to Amesbury, and in the convent there he saw Queen Gwenevere. Few but very sad were the words they spake. Sir Lancelot offered to give her a home in Brittany, away from the trouble and the ruin of the land, but she would not.

'My lord is dead,' she said, weeping, 'and this dear kingdom may not long stand, but while I live I will stay on its dear soil.'

Then Sir Lancelot fared far west through the wastelands, and came to the battlefield; and there he wept sorely to see the long lines of dead. Many were the dead knights of the Round Table whom he found unburied, and these with his own hands he laid in the grave, and he procured a priest to say prayers over them.

Further he went beside the shores of the Endless Waters, until one day he found a black barge, and stepping therein he was taken without sail or oars far over the wide sea, until the twilight. Then,

raising his sorrowing eyes, he was aware of a fair green island with a valley between two sweet hills, and there was a chapel, and all about it were trees all laden with blossoms.

A little bell began to ring just as the barge lightly touched the shore, and stepping therefrom, Sir Lancelot went into the chapel, and heard mass. Afterwards a bishop came unto him where he kneeled, and a hermit, and the latter seized his hand; and when he looked up Sir Lancelot knew it for Sir Bedevere. Neither could speak for the great tears that rolled down their grim faces, but Sir Bedevere drew him forth and led him to where a great white marble slab was lying, freshly cut, in the midmost part of the chapel.

Thereon Sir Lancelot saw the words, cut deep and wide, in black letters:

HIC JACET

ARTHURUS REX

QUONDAM REX QUE FUTURUS

Then did Sir Lancelot's heart almost burst with sorrow; and when he had finished praying and weeping, he kneeled unto the bishop and prayed him to shrive him and assoil him. Afterwards he besought him that he might live with him, and the holy man granted his request, and there ever after did Sir Lancelot, putting off all the fame and glory which he had gotten in the world, pass all

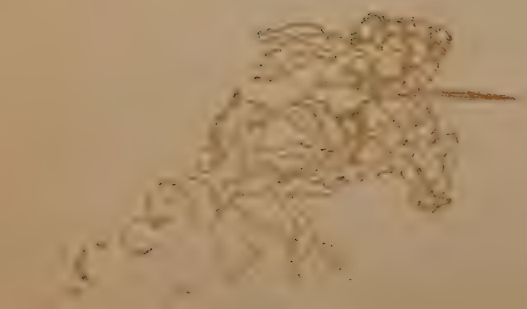
his days and nights, serving God with prayers and fastings and much abstinence.

When, within a year, Queen Gwenevere died in her cell at Amesbury, Sir Lancelot, having been advised in a dream of her death, braved the bands of lawless men that now ravaged the fair land of Britain, and brought her body to the isle of Glastonbury. He laid it solemnly beside the body of her dear lord Arthur, and thereafter he endured greater penance.

'For,' said he, 'by my stiff-necked pride did all this evil come. If I had gone straightway to my dear lord, and cast myself upon his love and justice, my lady the queen would not have been led to the stake, and I should not unwittingly have slain young Gareth. I am the causer of all the ruin and the sorrow that hath come upon this land, and never while I live may I forgive me.'

Thus evermore he prayed and mourned, day and night, but sometimes he slumbered a broken sleep. He ate but little, and neither the bishop nor Sir Bedevere could make him take comfort. And if you would know the time and place where Lancelot was happiest, it was when he was lying on the tomb of King Arthur and Queen Gwenevere.

At last, on a sweet morn in June, they found him lying there, stark dead, but with a gentle smile upon his wasted face. And when they had made the mass of requiem, they laid him in the tomb at the feet of the king and the queen, and on the



slab that covered him they caused these words to be graven:

HERE LIETH

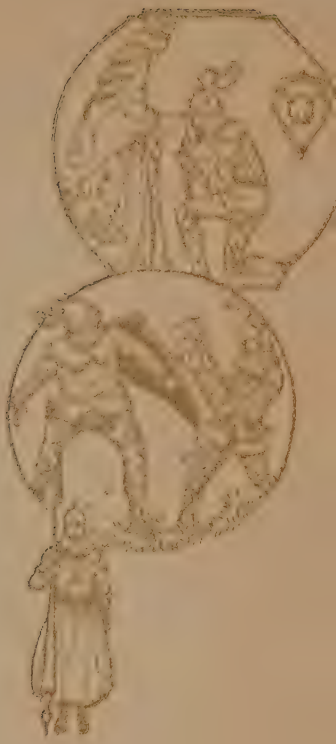
SIR LANCELOT DU LAKE

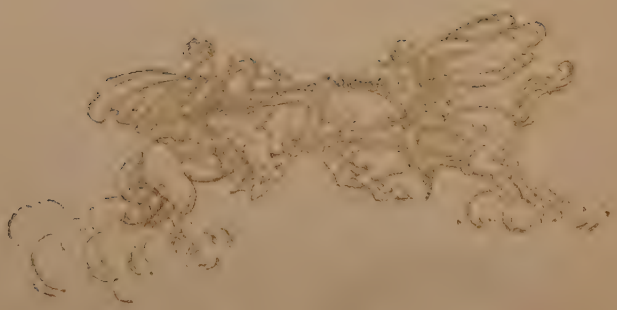
WHO WAS CHIEF OF ALL CHRISTIAN KNIGHTS; THE MOST COURTEOUS MAN AND THE TRUEST FRIEND, THE MEEKEST DOER OF GREAT DEEDS, AND THE GENTLEST TO ALL LADIES AND WEAK CREATURES.

R. I. P.

W. B. C.

THE END





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